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600072292S

IN SILK ATTIRE.

VOL. III.

IN SILK ATTIRE.

A Novel.

BY

WILLIAM BLACK,
AUTHOR OF "LOVE OR MARRIAGE?"

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
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IN SILK ATTIRE.

CHAPTER I.

EVIL TIDINGS.

VERY early did Dove get up that cool September morning. Away down the valley there lay a faintly-yellow haze, which made one feel that the sun was behind it and would soon drink it up. In the meantime the grass was wet. A birch tree that almost touched her bedroom window had its drooping branches of shivering leaves glistening with moisture. The willows along the river-side were almost hid. The withered and red chesnut leaves which floated on the pond had a cold autumn

look about them. Then old Thwaites, the keeper, appeared, with a pointer and a curly black retriever; and when the old man went into the meadow to knock down some walnuts from the trees, his breath was visible in the damp, thick atmosphere. She saw these things vaguely; she only knew with certainty that the sunlight and Will were coming.

A hundred times she made up her mind as to the mood in which she ought to receive him. Indeed, for weeks back she had done nothing but mentally rehearse that meeting; and every scene that she described to herself was immediately afterwards abandoned.

She was hurt, she knew; and in her secret heart she longed to——No! he had been very neglectful about letters, and she would——But in the meantime it was important, whatever *rôle* she might as-

sume, that she should look as pretty as possible.

This was all her immediate care—a care that had awoke her an hour too soon. But if she had changed her mind about the manner in which she should receive him, how much more about the costume which was to add effect to the scene? Every detail—every little ornament, and bit of ribbon, and dexterous fold, she studied, and altered, and studied, and altered again, until she was very nearly losing temper and wishing that people had been born to look their best without the necessity of clothing themselves.

Perhaps one might be allowed to make a parenthetical remark about those ladies who, dressing for a ball or the theatre, imagine that the less they clothe themselves the better they look. It is merely a question of the relative artistic value of certain surfaces.

600072292S

IN SILK ATTIRE.

VOL. III.

happen," said Dove, with a touch of contempt in her tone.

And Dove was right. For she herself was driven in the dog-cart over to Horton station, and she took care to make the man start half-an-hour before the proper time. The station-master, then and now one of the civillest of men, endeavoured to relieve the tedium of waiting by chatting to her; but she only half listened to him, and talked nonsense in reply.

She walked about the station, stared up the long perspective of narrowing lines, then walked in again to the small waiting-room, and wondered why the people about did not bestir themselves to receive the coming train. Then, with a flutter of the heart, she saw the signals changed, and presently there was a far-off noise which told of Will's approach. For he had written from Paris to say that unless they got other

notice from him, he would be down by this particular train.

A railway-station is not the proper place for a piece of acting. Scenes of the most tender and tragic kind—never to be forgotten—have been witnessed there; but the gentle drawing-room comedies with which lovers amuse themselves do not harmonize with the rough and ready accessories of a railway-line. Dove resolved to leave her proper reception of Will until they should be in the house together; at present it was to be nothing but a hurried, delicious kissing, scrambling after luggage, and swift getting home.

There was no head thrust out from one of the approaching carriages—no handkerchief waved. She did not know which of the dull, dark, and heavy carriages might not have him inside; but she was sure he could not escape her at the station.

The train stopped, the guard bustled about, the people descended from the carriages, the porters looked out for luggage and sixpences. With a half-realized fear—a dread of some vague evil—Dove glanced quickly along the people, then more narrowly; finally she turned to the carriages. The doors were again shut; the guard blew his whistle, and leisurely stepped into his box; and the train moved slowly out of the station. There was no Will Anerley there.

Sick at heart she turned away. It was a cruel disappointment: for weeks she had been planning the whole scene, she had dreamt of the meeting, had thought of it during the drowsy hush of the Sunday-morning sermon, had looked forward to it as the crowning compensation for the microscopic troubles of her daily life. There was not even a letter to say that he was in England; perhaps he was still in France.

So she went home, vexed, and disappointed, and sad. Mr. Anerley was out shooting; Mrs. Anerley soothingly said that doubtless Will would be down by a later train; and then Dove went away into a corner of the drawing-room, and plunged herself into a volume of old music, turning over the leaves and supping a surfeit of sad memories.

Before going to the train that morning Will had found it necessary to call upon a doctor. From him he learned, firstly, that the original dressing of the wounds in his arm had been far from satisfactory; and secondly, that owing to some disturbant cause renewed inflammation had set in. Indeed, the doctor gave him to understand that only prompt attention and great care could prevent the wounds assuming a very serious aspect.

"Your arm must have suffered some violence quite recently," said the doctor.

"Well, last night," said Will, "I knocked a man down with my left arm, and very likely I instinctively twitched up the right to guard myself."

"These are little amusements which a man in your condition had better forego," said the other, quietly. "The best thing you can do is to go home and get to bed, give your arm perfect rest, and I will call in the afternoon and see what is to be done."

"I can't do that," said Will, "I'm going down to the country."

"You will do so at your peril."

"All the same, I must go. Nothing is likely to happen between to-day and Monday. If you had seen the leg I had in Turkey!—without any doctor but a servant who could not even infuse our tea—constant rain—walking every day—our tent letting in water at night——"

"I don't know about your leg in Turkey," said the doctor, tartly, "but I see the condition in which your arm is now. If you think it will get well by exposing it to rain, well and good——"

"Can you do anything to it *now?*"

"No, unless you give the limb perfect rest."

"Very well. If it gets very bad, I shall come up to town to-morrow. If not, I shall visit you on Monday, and do everything you tell me then."

He got into a cab and drove back to his chambers. The man had already taken his portmanteau downstairs, when Count Schönstein's brougham drove up, and the Count jumped out.

"Where are you going?"

"To St. Mary-Kirby."

"Not now. Come inside. I have something to tell you."

They stepped inside: never before had Will observed the Count to be so disturbed.

"Miall and Welling," he said, hurriedly, "I have just heard—not ten minutes ago—have collapsed—the announcement will be made to-day—the directors were in the place till twelve last night. It will be the most fearful crash, they say; for the bank has lately been making the wildest efforts to save itself——"

"I thought Miall and Welling's was as safe as the Bank of England," said Will—just a trifle pale.

Every farthing of his father's money was in this bank, which had never even been suspected in the most general crises.

"It may be only a rumour," continued the Count. "But you may as well wait, to see if the evening papers have anything about it."

"It will be a pretty story to carry down with me to Kent," said Will.

"That's what I was thinking of," said the Count, kindly—indeed he was not wholly a selfish man; "and I thought I might go down with you, if you liked, and try to help your father over the first shock. It will be a terrible blow to him—a man who has lived a quiet and easy life, with a little hunting, and shooting, and so on. I shouldn't wonder if it entirely upset him and did some harm——"

"You don't know my father," said Will.

They had not to wait for the evening papers. By twelve o'clock the news was current in the city. Miall and Welling had sent out their circular: the bank had suspended payment.

This was the cause of Will's missing the train. When he took his seat in the next train going down, it was with a feeling that

now ill-fortune had done its worst, and there was nothing more to encounter. He thought of that wild scene of last night by the banks of the river,—of the strange, sad, unfathomable look of the young actress's eyes,—of their bitter parting, and the tender words she spoke as he left. Then he looked forward to meeting Dove with a cold fear at his heart; and he was almost glad that the more immediate and terrible business he had on hand would distract his attention.

He left his portmanteau at the station, and walked round to the brow of the hill. Before him lay the well-known valley, still and silent under the yellow autumn sunlight; and down there by the river he saw a tall, spare man—accompanied by another man and a couple of dogs—whose figure he easily recognised. He walked in that direction, crossing the low-lying meadows and the

river, and rounding a bit of coppice which skirted a turnip-field.

As he turned the corner, a covey of birds rose just in front of him, with a prodigious whirr of wings.

"Mark!" he called, instinctively, though he was quite unaware of the proximity of anybody with a gun.

The next second there was a double report; two of the birds came tumbling down, scattering their feathers in the air, and there was a muttered admonition to the pointer. A few steps further brought him into view of Mr. Anerley and old Thwaites, both of whom were marking down the remaining birds of the covey, as the low, swift, sailing flight seemed to near the ground.

"Why did you come round that way?" said Mr. Anerley when he saw his son. "I might have shot you."

"I shouldn't have minded, sir," said Will. "I'm getting used to it."

"You have your arm in a sling yet? I thought it was all right."

"The doctor pulls long faces over it. I fancy the man in the Black Forest bungled it."

"If the Black Foresters don't know how to cure men shot by mistake, they ought to," said Mr. Anerley, with a thoroughly English contempt for any kind of shooting but his own. "Such a set of sparrow-shooting shoemakers I never saw. I suppose I needn't offer you my gun?"

"No, thank you. I'll walk down the turnips with you, on my way to the house."

There was little left in the turnips, however. A solitary bird got up, almost out of shot, and Mr. Anerley knocked him over very cleverly. There was no smile of triumph, however, on the firm-set lips of the

tall, keen-faced, grey-haired sportsman. He quietly put another cartridge into the barrel and walked on, occasionally growling at the dog, which was continually making false points. Almost at the end of the turnips the dog made a very decided point.

"Ware lark! gr-r-r-r!" cried old Thwaites, and at the same instant a fine covey of birds, startled by the cry, got up out of shot. The dog had really been on the scent of the partridges.

Mr. Anerley said nothing, but he did not look particularly pleased.

"If that had not been old Thwaites," muttered Will, "I should have said it was an old fool."

So Will walked on to Chesnut Bank. He had not the heart to tear the old man away from his favourite sport in order to give him this bad news. After dinner, he

now thought, would be time enough; and he himself seemed to have gained a respite until then.

But if he was in the meanwhile relieved from the necessity of bearing the evil tidings to his father, there remained his meeting with Dove, which he had for long looked forward to with a half-conscious fear. As he drew near the house, he began to think this the greater trial of the two.

Dove, still sitting in the drawing-room, heard footsteps on the gravelled pathway leading down through the garden. The music almost dropped from her hands as she listened intently for a moment—then a flush of joyous colour stole over her face. But, all the same, she opened the book again, and sate obstinately looking at pages which she did not see.

"Dove," said Will, tapping at the French window, "open and let me in."

No answer—Dove still intently regarding the music.

So he had to go on to the hall-door, ring the bell, and enter the drawing-room from the passage.

"Oh, you are come back again!" said Dove, with mimic surprise, and with admirably simulated carelessness.

She held out her hand to him. She fancied he would be dreadfully astonished and perturbed by this cold reception—that they would have a nice little quarrel, and an explanation, and all the divine joys of making-up, before Mrs. Anerley could come down from the apple-closet, in which she had been engaged since breakfast-time. But, on the contrary, Will was neither surprised nor disturbed. He looked quite grave, perhaps a little sad, and took her hand, saying kindly—

"Yes, back again. I hope you have been

well while I was away, Dove; and that you amused yourself."

Dove was alarmed. He had not even offered to kiss her.

"What is the matter with you, Will?" she said, with a vague fear in her pretty violet eyes.

"Why, nothing much."

"Is it I, then? Are you vexed with me, that you should be so cold with me after being away so long a time?"

There she stood, with her eyes downcast, a troubled look on her face, and both her hands pulling to pieces a little engraving she held.

"Why should I be vexed with you, Dove?" he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. He dared not kiss her: there dwelt on his lips yet the memory of that sad leave-taking of the night before.

"Then why are you and I standing here

like strangers?" she said, stamping her little foot.

She could not tell how things had all gone wrong; but they had gone wrong; and the meeting she had looked forward to with such pleasurable anticipation was an embarrassing failure.

At this moment Mrs. Anerley entered, and the girl saw her receive the kiss which had been denied to herself.

"You are not looking well, Will," said the observant mother. "Is your arm healing rightly?"

"Oh, yes, well enough."

"You are fatigued, then. Let me bring you some sherry."

She left the room, and then Dove—looking hesitatingly for a moment—ran forward to him, and buried her face in his bosom, and burst into tears.

"It was all my fault, dear," she sobbed.

"I wanted to be angry with you for not coming down by the first train—and—and I thought you would pet me, and make it up, you know—and I even forgot to ask about your arm; but it wasn't, dear, because I didn't think of it——"

"There, it's all right," he said. "I didn't notice you were vexed with me, or I should have made friends with you at once. There, now, you're only ruffling all your pretty hair, and such a delicate little collar you've got!"

"Oh!" she said, with smiles breaking through her tears, "you don't know what I have been making for you."

"Tell me."

"Twenty times I was near telling you in my letters; but I stopped. I tried to get it done to give it you to-day, but I couldn't; and—and perhaps it was that made me vexed with you."

"Very likely," said Will, who thoroughly understood the charming byways of Dove's logic.

"It is a worsted waistcoat," she said, in a solemn whisper, "all knitted by myself. And I've put in some of my hair, so that you never could see it unless I showed it to you. They say that to give any one some of your hair is so unlucky—that it always means parting; but I couldn't help putting in just a little."

"To represent a little parting—from Saturday to Monday, for example."

"Are you going up to town again to-morrow?" she said with fresh alarm.

"The doctor says I ought; but we shall see when to-morrow comes."

So peace was established between them. It was only as an afterthought she remembered that he had never once kissed her.

During dinner, Will was almost silent. They supposed he was tired with the journey home. When Mrs. Anerley and Dove had left the room, he knew the time was come.

"I have bad news for you, father," he said.

"Out with it, then," said Mr. Anerley. "Everybody in the house is well in health; anything else does not much matter."

"Miall and Welling are down."

The old man put back his wine-glass on the table.

"Miall and Welling's bank is down?" he said, slowly.

"Yes."

"Are you sure of it?"

"There is their circular."

He read the paper carefully, and laid it down.

"They say," said Will, "that their affairs are in a terrible plight—quite hopeless."

"That means that I have not a farthing of money beyond what is in the house."

He remained silent for several minutes, his eyes fixed on the table before him. Then he said—

"Very well. There are four of us. If we two men cannot support ourselves and these two women, should not every one have a right to laugh at us?"

"But that you, at your age——"

"My age? I am in the prime of life. Indeed, it is time I did something to show that I could have earned my own bread all along."

"I'm glad you look at it in that way," said Will, rather sadly. "Here am I, unable to earn a penny until my arm gets better. You know nothing specially of any business——"

"It is not too late to learn, my lad. There are plenty of things to which I could turn my hand. Imagine what a capital keeper I should be; and how I should overawe the trembling Cockneys invited down to a grand battue into giving me monstrous tips! Now let us look at the thing in another light."

He straightened himself up, as if throwing some weight off his shoulders. Then he relapsed into his old manner, and there was a sort of sad smile on his face.

"Edmond About," he said, "declares that all men are producers, and have, therefore, a right to the property they possess, except robbers, beggars, and gamblers. Doubtless the money I possessed was very valuable to the people to whom I lent it, and they paid me for putting its working powers at their disposal. You understand?"

"Yes."

"I was, in that sense, a producer, and had a right to the money on which I lived. M. About tells me that I had. But, in spite of that, I was always bothered by an uneasy conviction that the ancestor of mine who brought the money into the family could not have made it by his own hands. Indeed, I am convinced that my rich progenitor—who, let us say, came over with William—was nothing else than a prodigious thief, who either stole money in the shape of taxes, or the means of making money in the shape of land, from the people who then owned it. I therefore, you see, have no right to the possession of money acquired by robbery."

"You only discover that when the money is gone," said Will, accustomed to his father's philosophic and easy way of taking things.

"Not at all. I have for some time back been proud to class myself amongst the

richest and oldest families of England, in regard to the moral shadiness of our right to live on the produce of gigantic thievery. You see——"

"I see, sir, that the moment you lose your money, you become a philosophic Radical."

"Ah, well," said Mr. Anerley, sending a sigh after his vanished riches, "I don't think the misfortune has touched us much, when we can transfer it into the region of first principles. Perhaps I had better go up to town with you to-morrow and see what practical issues it must lead to."

"And in the meantime," said Will, "don't tell either of the women."

CHAPTER II.

THE COUNT'S CHANCE.

"WHERE is Mr. Melton?" asked the Count.

"Up in the 'flies,' sir, I believe," said the prompter. "Shall I send for him?"

"No, I shall go up to him," said the Count.

It was on the evening of the day on which he had told Will of Miall and Welling's downfal. After having ascertained the truth of the report, he had gone to spend the remainder of the day at his club, in talking, reading, and dining; and when he did think of going round to the theatre,

he found that the piece in which Annie Brunel played would be over and she gone home. This was as he wished.

So he made his way up the well-worn wooden steps until he reached the "flies," where he found Mr. Melton seated on the drum which rolled up the drop-scene, in earnest talk with a carpenter. On seeing the Count, the man walked away, and Mr. Melton rose.

"Welcome back to England," said the manager, rather nervously. "I have been most anxious to see you."

"Ah," said the Count.

"Indeed the strangest thing has happened—completely floored me—never heard the like—" continued Mr. Melton, hurriedly. "Have you seen Miss Brunel?"

"No," said the Count.

"Not since you returned?"

"No."

"You are not acquainted with her resolution?"

"No."

"Then let me tell you what happened not half-an-hour ago in this very theatre. You see that scenery? It's all new. The dresses are new, new music, new decorations, a new theatre, and—d——n it all—it's enough to make a man mad!"

"But what is it?" asked the Count of the abnormally excited manager.

"A few minutes ago Miss Brunel comes to me and says, 'Mr. Melton, a word with you.'

"'Certainly,' said I.

"Then she turned a little pale; and had that curious look in her eyes that she used to wear on the stage, you know; and said clearly, 'I am not going to act any more.'

"When I had recovered breath, I said,

"'Pardon me, Miss Brunel, you must. Look at the expense I have been put to in getting up this revival——'"

"And then she grew excited, as if she were half-mad, and implored me not to compel her to fulfil her engagement. She said her acting was a failure; that everybody knew it was a failure; that she had an invincible repugnance to going on the stage again, and that nothing would tempt her to begin a new piece, either with me or with anybody else. I can assure you, Count Schönstein, now that I think over it, there never was a finer scene in any play than she acted then—with her despair, and her appeals, and her determination. I thought at first she was bewitched; and then I declare she was so nearly on the point of bewitching me that I was almost agreeing to everything she asked, only——"

"Only what?"

"Only I remembered that the theatre was not wholly my own affair, and that I had no business to compromise its interests by—you understand?"

"Quite right—quite right," said the Count, hastily. "And then——"

"Then she left."

"But what—what is the reason of her wishing to leave the stage?"

"I don't know."

"Had she heard any—any news, for example?"

"I don't know."

"Why, Melton, what a fellow you are!" cried the Count, peevishly. "I'm sure you could easily have found out, if you cared, what she meant by it."

"I tell you I was quite dumbfounded—"

"And she said nothing about any news—or her prospects—or a change——"

"Nothing. From what she said, I

gathered that she had come to dislike acting, and that she was convinced her future career would be wretched both for herself and the house. You have never asked me about the theatre at all. The first two or three nights the curiosity of people to see her in the new part gave us some good business; but now the papers have changed their tune, and the public——"

Mr. Melton shrugged his shoulders; but Count Schönstein was paying no attention to him.

If she has discovered the secret, he was reasoning with himself, *she would be in no such desperate hurry to leave the stage. If she has not, now is the time for me.*

"Melton," he said, "what would be a reasonable forfeit if she broke her engagement?"

"I don't know. I should say 200*l.*

She said she could not offer me compensation in money, and that's why she begged so hard of me for the favour. God knows, if I could afford it, and were my own master, I should not make the poor creature keep to her engagement. Look at the money she used to put into the treasury every week."

"Very good. Come downstairs to your room. I want to transact some business with you."

When they had gone down to the stage and passed through the wings to Mr. Melton's private room, both men sate down in front of a table on which were writing materials.

"Take a sheet of paper, like a good fellow," said the Count, "and write to my dictation."

Melton took the pen in his hand, and the Count continued——

"*My dear Miss Brunel, in consideration of your past services, and of the great success attending*—should that be attendant, Melton? —*upon your previous labours in this theatre, I beg to offer you entire liberty to break your present engagement, at whatever time you please. Yours sincerely, Charles Melton.*"

"And what do you propose to do with that, Count?" said Melton, with a smile.

"I propose to give you this bit of paper for it," said the Count.

He handed the manager an *I O U* for 200*l.*; and then carefully folded up the letter and put it in his pocket.

CHAPTER III.

DOUBTFUL.

WITHOUT taking off either bonnet or cloak, Annie Brunel, on reaching home that night, went at once to Mrs. Christmas' room, and flung herself down on the edge of the bed where the poor old woman lay, ailing and languid.

"Oh, mother, mother," cried the girl, "I can never go to the theatre any more!"

She buried her face in the bed-clothes, and only stretched out her hand for sympathy. The old woman tried to put her arm round the girl's neck, but relinquished the attempt with a sigh.

"What is to become of us, Miss Annie?"

"I don't know—I don't know," she said, almost wildly, "and why should I care any longer?"

"What new trouble is this that has fallen on us?" said Mrs. Christmas, faintly. "Why do you speak like that?"

"Because I don't know what to say, mother—because I would rather die than go to the theatre again—and he says I must. I cannot go—I cannot go—and there is no one to help me!"

The old woman turned her eyes—and they looked large in the shrivelled and weakly face—on her companion.

"Annie, you wont tell me what is the matter. Why should you hate the stage? Hasn't it been kind to you? Wasn't it kind to your mother—for many a long year, when she and you depended on it

for your lives? The stage is a kind home for many a poor creature whom the world has cast out—and you, Miss Annie, who have been in a theatre all your life, what has taken you now? The newspapers?"

The girl only shook her head.

"Because the business isn't good?"

No answer.

"Has Mr. Melton been saying anything——"

"I tell you, mother," said the girl, passionately, "that I will not go upon the stage, because I hate it! And I hate the people—I hate them for staring at me, and making me ashamed of myself. I hate them because they are rich, and happy, and full of their own concerns—indeed, mother, I can't tell you—I only know that I will never go on the stage again, let them do what they like. Oh, to feel their eyes on

me, and to know that I am only there for their amusement, and to know that I cannot compel them to—to anything but sit and compassionately admire my dress and my efforts to please them. I can't bear it, Lady Jane, I can't bear it."

And here she broke out into a fit of hysterical sobbing.

"My poor dear, when I should be strong and ready to comfort you, here I am weaker and more helpless than yourself. But don't go back to the theatre, sweetheart, until your taste for it returns——"

"It will never return. I hate the thought of it."

"But it may. And in the meantime haven't we over 40*l.* in the house of good savings?"

"That is nothing to what I must undertake to give Mr. Melton if I break my en-

gagement. But I don't mind that much, Lady Jane—I don't mind anything except going back there, and you must never ask me to go back. Say that you wont! We shall get along somehow——"

"My darling, how can you imagine *I* would seek to send you back?"

Annie Brunel did not sleep much that night; but by the morning she had recovered all her wonted courage and self-composure. Indeed, it was with a new and singular sense of freedom and cheerfulness that she rose to find the world before her, her own path through it as yet uncertain and full of risks. But she was now mistress of herself; she went to bid Mrs. Christmas good morning with a blithe air, and then, as every Englishwoman does under such circumstances, she sent for the *Times*.

She had no definite impression about her capabilities for earning her living out of the

dramatic profession; but she expected to find all the requisite suggestions in the *Times*. Here was column after column of proffered employment; surely one little bit might be allotted to her. So she sate down hopefully before the big sheet, and proceeded to put a well-defined cross opposite each advertisement which she imagined offered her a fair chance.

While she was thus engaged, Count Schönstein's brougham was announced; and a few minutes thereafter, the Count, having sent up his card, was permitted to enter the room.

Outwardly his appearance was elaborate, and he wore a single deep crimson rose in the lapel of his tightly-buttoned frock-coat. His eyes, however, were a little anxious. And it was soon apparent that he had for the present relinquished his grand manner.

"I am delighted to see you looking so well," he said, "and I hope Mrs. Christmas is also the better for her holiday——"

"Poor Lady Jane is very ill," said Miss Brunel, "though she will scarcely admit it."

"Have I disturbed your political studies?" he asked, looking at the open newspaper.

"I have been reading the advertisements of situations," she said, frankly.

"Not, I hope," he remarked, "with any reference to what I heard from Mr. Melton last night about your retiring from the stage?"

"Indeed, it is from no other cause," she said, cheerfully. "I have resolved not to play any more; but we cannot live without my doing something——"

"In the meantime," said the Count, drawing a letter from his pocket, "I have

much pleasure in handing you this note from Mr. Melton. You will find that it releases you from your present engagement, whenever you choose to avail yourself of the power."

"The young girl's face was lit up with a sudden glow of happiness and gratitude.

"How can I ever thank him for this great kindness," she said,—"so unexpected, so generous. Indeed, I must go and see him and thank him personally—it is the greatest kindness I have received for years."

The Count was a little puzzled.

"You understand, Miss Brunel, that—that paper, you see, was not quite Mr. Melton's notion until——"

"Until you asked him? Then I am indebted to you for many kindnesses, but for this more than all. I feel as if you had given me a pair of wings. How shall I ever thank you sufficiently——"

"*By becoming my wife.*"

He had nearly uttered the words; but he did not. He felt that his mission that morning was too serious to be risked without the most cautious introduction. Besides, she was in far too good spirits to have such a suggestion made to her. He felt instinctively that, in her present mood, she would certainly laugh at him—the most frightful catastrophe that can happen to a man under the circumstances. And Count Schönstein had sufficient acquaintance with actresses to know that while they have the most astonishing capacity for emotion, if their sympathies be properly excited, there are no people who, in cold blood, can so accurately detect the ridiculous in a man's exterior. An actress in love forgets everything but her love; an actress not in love has the cruellest eye for the oddities or defects of figure and costume.

At the present moment, Count Schönstein felt sure that if he spoke of love, and marriage, and so forth, Miss Brunel would be looking at the rose in his button-hole, or scanning his stiff necktie and collar, or the unblushing corpulence of his waist. In his heart he wished he had no rose in his button-hole.

It would be very easy to make fun of this poor Count (and he was aware of the fact himself) as he stood there, irresolute, diffident, anxious. But there was something almost pathetic as well as comic, in his position. Consider how many vague aspirations were now concentrated upon this visit. Consider how he had thought about it as he had dressed himself many a morning, as he had gone to bed many a night; how, with a strange sort of loyalty, he had striven to exalt his motives and persuade himself that he was quite disinterested; how the dull pursuit of his

life, position and influence, had been tinged with a glow of sentiment and romance by meeting this young girl.

"She has no friends," he said to himself, many a time, "neither have I. Why should not we make common cause against the indifference and hauteur of society? I can make a good husband—I would yield in all things to her wishes. And away down in Kent together—we two—even if we should live only for each other——"

The Count tried hard to keep this view of the matter before his eyes. When sometimes his errant imagination would picture his marriage with the poor actress,—then his claim, on behalf of his wife, for the estates and title of the Marquis of Knottingley's daughter, then the surprise, the chatter of the clubs, the position in society he would assume, the money he would have at his command, the easy invitations to *battues* he

could dispense like as many worthless coppers among the young lords and venerable baronets—and so forth, and so forth—he dwelt upon the prospect with an unholy and ashamed delight, and strove to banish it from his mind as a temptation of the devil.

These conflicting motives, and the long train of anticipations connected with them, only served to render his present situation the more tragic. He knew that one great crisis of his life had come; and it is not only incomparable heroes, possessed of all human graces and virtues, who meet with such crises.

"When do you propose to leave the stage?" he asked.

"I have left," she answered.

"You won't play to-night?"

"No."

"But Mr. Melton——"

"Since he has been so kind as to give me, at your instigation, this release, must get Miss Featherstone to play 'Rosalind.' Nelly will play it very nicely, and my best wishes will go with her."

"Then I must see him instantly," said the Count, "and give him notice to get a handbill printed."

"If you would be so kind——"

But this was too bad. She intimated by her manner that she expected him to leave at once, merely for the sake of the wretched theatre. He took up the newspaper, by way of excuse, and for a minute or two glanced down its columns.

"Have you any fixed plans about what you mean to do?" he asked.

"None whatever," she replied. "Indeed I am in no hurry. You have no idea how I love this sense of freedom you have just

given me, and I mean to enjoy it for a little time."

"But after then?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and smiled: he thought he had never seen her look so charming.

"You don't know what lies before you," he said, gravely, "if you think of battling single-handed against the crowds of London. You don't know the thousands who are far more eager in the fight for bread than you are; because you haven't experienced the necessity yet——"

"I have fought for my bread ever since my poor mother died," she said.

"With exceptional advantages, and these you now abandon. My dear Miss Brunel," he added, earnestly, "you don't know what you're doing. I shudder to think of the future that you seem to have chalked out for yourself. On the other hand, I see a

probable future for you in which you would not have to depend upon any one for your support; you would be independent of those people whom you profess to dislike; you would be rich, happy, with plenty of amusement, nothing to trouble you, and you would also secure a pleasant home for Mrs. Christmas——"

"Have you imagined all that out of one of these advertisements?" she asked, with a smile.

"No, Miss Brunel," said the Count, whose earnestness gave him an eloquence which certainly did not often characterize his speech. "Can't you guess what I mean? I am sure you know how I esteem you—you must have seen it—and perhaps you guessed what feelings lay behind that—and —and now you are alone, as it were, you have no friends—why not accept my home, and become my wife?"

"Your wife?" she repeated, suddenly becoming quite grave, and looking down.

"Yes," he said, delighted to find that she did not get up in a towering passion, as he had seen so many ladies do, under similar circumstances, on the stage, "I hope you do not feel offended. I have spoken too abruptly, perhaps—but now it is out, let me beg of you to listen to me. Look at this, Miss Brunel, fairly—I don't think I have an unkind disposition—I am sincerely attached to you—you are alone, as I say, with scarcely a friend—we have many tastes in common, and as I should have nothing to do but invent amusements for you, I think we should lead an agreeable life. I am not a very young man, but on the other hand I haven't my way to make in the world. You don't like the stage. I am glad of it. It assures me that if you would only think

well of my proposal, we should lead a very agreeable life. I'm sure we should have a pleasant agreeable life; for, after all,—it is absurd to mention this just now, perhaps—but one has a good deal of latitude in 30,000*l.* a year—and you don't have to trouble your mind—and if the most devoted affection can make you happy, then happy you'll be."

Annie Brunel sate quite silent, and not very much affected or put out. She had been in good spirits all the morning, had been nerving herself for a heroic and cheerful view of the future; and now here was something to engage her imagination! There is no woman in the world, whatever her training may have been, who, under such circumstances, and with such a picturesque offer held out to her, would refuse at least to regard and try to realize the prospect.

"You are very kind," she said, "to do me so much honour. But you are too kind. You wish to prevent my being subjected to the hardships of being poor and having to work for a living, and you think the easiest way to do that is to make me the mistress of all your money——"

"I declare, Miss Brunel, you wrong me," said the Count, warmly. "Money has nothing to do with it. I mentioned these things as inducements—unwisely, perhaps. Indeed it has nothing to do with it. Wont you believe me when I say that I could hope for no greater fortune and blessing in the world, if neither you nor I had a farthing of money, than to make you my wife?"

"I am afraid you would be sadly disappointed," she said, with a smile.

"Will you let me risk that?" he said, eagerly, and trying to take her hand.

She withdrew her hand, and rose.

"I can't tell you yet," she said; "I can scarcely believe that we are talking seriously. But you have been always very kind, and I'm very much obliged to you——"

"Miss Brunel," said the Count, hurriedly—he did not like to hear a lady say she was much obliged by his offer of 30,000*l.* a year—"don't make any abrupt decision, if you have not made up your mind. At any rate, you don't refuse to consider the matter? I knew you would at least do me that justice—in a week's time, perhaps——"

She gave him her hand, as he lifted his hat and cane, and he gratefully bowed over it, and ventured to kiss it, and then he took his leave, with a radiant smile on his face as he went downstairs.

"Club. And, d——n it, be quick!" he said to his astonished coachman.

Arrived there, he ordered the waiter to take up to the smoking-room a bottle of the pale port which the Count was in the habit of drinking there. Then he countermanded the order.

"I needn't make a beast of myself because I feel happy," he said to himself, wisely, as he went into the dining-room. "Alfred, I'll have a bit of cold chicken, and a bottle of the wine that you flatter yourself is Château Yquem."

Alfred, who was a tall and stately person, with red hair, and no *h*'s, was not less astonished than the Count's coachman had been. However, he brought the various dishes, and then the wine. The Count poured the beautiful amber fluid into a tumbler, and took a draught of it.

"Here's to her health, whether the wine came from Bordeaux or Biberich."

But as a rule the Château Yquem of clubs is a cold drink, which never sparkled under the warm sun of France; and so, as the Count went upstairs to the smoking-room, he returned to his old love, and told them to send him a pint bottle of port. He had already put twenty-two shillings' worth of wine into his capacious interior; and he had only to add a glass or two of port, and surround his face with the perfume of an old, hard, and dry cigar, in order to get into that happy mood when visions are born of the half-somnolent brain.

". . I have done it—I have broken the ice, and there is still hope. Her face was pleased, her smile was friendly, her soft, clear eyes—fancy having that smile and those eyes at your breakfast-table every morning, to sweeten the morning air for you, and make you snap your fingers at the

outside world. Gad, I could write poetry about her. I'll *live* poetry—which will be something better . ."

At this moment there looked into the room a handsome and dressy young gentleman who was the funny fellow of the club. He lived by his wits, and managed to make a good income, considering the material on which he had to work.

"What a courageous man—port in the forenoon!" he said, to the Count.

The other said nothing; but inwardly devoted the new comer to the deeps of Hades.

"And smoking to our old port!"

"A cigar doesn't make much difference to club-wines, young gentleman," said the Count, grandly.

"Heard a good thing just now. Fellow was abusing Scotchmen to a Scotch tradesman, and of course Bannockburn was men-

tioned. 'Why,' says the Englishman, 'plenty of my countrymen were buried at Bannockburn, and there you have rich harvests of grain. Plenty of *your* countrymen were buried at Culloden, and there you have only a barren waste. Scotchmen can't even fatten the land.'"

"Did he kill him?"

"No; the Englishman was a customer."

Once more the Count was left to his happy imaginings.

"Then the marriage," he thought to himself, "then the marriage,—the girls in white, champagne, fun, horses, and flowers, and away for France! No Trouville for me, no Etretât, no Biarritz. A quiet old Norman town, with an old inn, and an old priest; and she and I walking about like the lord and lady of the place, with all the children turning and looking at her as if she were an

Italian saint come down from one of the pictures in the church. This is what I offer her—instead of what? A sempstress's garret in Camden Town, or a music mistress's lodgings in Islington, surrounded by squalid and dingy people, glaring public-houses, smoke, foul air, wretchedness and misery. I take her from the slums of Islington and I lead her down into the sweet air of Kent, and I make a queen of her!"

The Count's face beamed with pleasure, and port. The very nimbleness of his own imagination tickled him.

"Look at her! In a white, cool, morning-dress, with her big heaps of black hair braided up, as she goes daintily down into the garden in the warm sunshine, and her little fingers are gathering a bouquet for her breast. The raw-boned wives of your country gentry, trying to cut a dash on the money they get from selling their extra

fruit and potatoes, turn and look at my soft little Italian princess as she lies back in her barouche, and regards them kindly enough, God bless her! What a job I shall have to teach her her position—to let her know that now she is a lady the time for general good humour is gone. Mrs. Anerley, yes; but none of your clergymen's wives, nor your doctors' wives, nor your cow-breeding squires' wives for her! Day after day, week after week, nothing but brightness, and pleasure, and change. All this I am going to give her in exchange for the squalor of Islington!"

The Count regarded himself as the best of men. At this moment, however, there strolled into the smoking-room a certain Colonel Tyrwhitt who was connected by blood or marriage with half-a-dozen peerages, had a cousin in the Cabinet, and wore on his finger a ring given him by the decent

and devout old King of Saxony. This colonel—"a poor devil I could buy up twenty times over," said the Count, many a time—walked up to the fire-place, and turning, proceeded to contemplate the Count, his wine, and cigar, as if these objects had no sensible existence. He stroked his grey moustache once or twice, yawned very openly, and then walked lazily out of the room again without having uttered a word.

"D—n him!" said the Count, mentally; "the wretched pauper, who lives by loo, and looks as grand as an emperor because he has some swell relations, who wont give him a farthing. These are the people who will be struck dumb with amazement and envy by-and-by. My time is coming.

"'Ah! my dear fellah,' says this colonel to me, some morning; 'I've heard the news. Congratulate you — all my heart.

Lord Bockerminster tells me you've some wonderful shooting down in Berks.'

"'So I have,' says I; 'and I should be glad, Colonel, to ask you down, but you know my wife and I have to be rather select in our choice of visitors——'

"'What the devil do' you mean?' says he.

"'Only that our list of invitations is closed for the present.'

"Suppose he gets furious? Let him! I don't know much about fencing or pistol-shooting, but I'd undertake to punch his head twenty times a week."

The Count took another sip of port, and pacified himself.

"Then the presentations to her Majesty. I shouldn't wonder if the Queen took us up when she gets to learn Annie's story. It would be just like the Queen to make some sort of compensation; and once she saw her

it would be all right. The *Court Circular*—'Osborne, May 1. Count Schönstein and Lady Annie Knottingley had the honour of dining with the Queen and the Royal Family.' Lord Bockerminster comes up to me, and says—

"'Schönstein, old boy, when are you going to give me a turn at your pheasants? I hear you have the best preserves in the south of England.'

"'Well, you see, my lord,' I say, carelessly, 'I have the Duke of S—— and a party of gentlemen going down on the 12th, and the Duke is so particular about the people he meets that I—you understand?'

"And why only a Duke? The Prince of Wales is as fond of pheasant shooting as anybody else, I suppose. Why shouldn't he come down with the Princess and a party? and I'd make the papers talk of the splendid hospitality of the place, if I paid,

damme, a thousand pounds for every dish. Then to see the Princess—God bless her, for she's the handsomest woman in England, bar one—walking down on the terrace with Annie, while the Prince comes up to me and chaffs me about some blunder I made the day before. Then I say—

"'Well, your Royal Highness, if your Royal Highness was over at Schönstein and shooting with my keepers there, perhaps you might put your foot in it too.'

"'Count Schönstein,' says he, 'you're a good fellow and a trump, and you'll come down with your pretty wife and see us at Frogmore?'"

The Count broke into a loud and triumphant laugh, and had nearly demolished the glass in front of him by an unlucky sweep of the arm. Indeed, further than this interview with these celebrated persons, the imagination of the Count could not carry

him. He could wish for nothing beyond these things except the perpetuity of them. The Prince of Wales should live for ever, if only to be his friend.

And if this ultimate and royal view of the future was even more pleasing than the immediate and personal one, it never occurred to him that there could be any material change in passing from one to the other. Annie Brunel was to be grateful and loving towards him for having taken her from 'the squalor of Islington' to give her a wealthy station; she was to be equally grateful and loving when she found herself the means of securing to her husband that position and respect which he had deceived her to obtain. Such trifling points were lost in the full glory which now bathed the future that lay before his eyes. Annie Brunel had shown herself not unwilling to consent, which was equivalent to consent-

ing; and there only remained to be reaped all the happiness which his imagination, assisted by a tolerable quantity of wine, could conceive.

CHAPTER IV.

MOTHER CHRISTMAS'S STORY.

ANNIE BRUNEL ran into Mrs. Christmas's room the moment Count Schönstein had left, and, sitting down by the bedside, took the old woman's lean hand in hers.

"Lady Jane, I have been looking over the advertisements in the *Times*, and do you know what I have found?"

"No."

"One offering me a marvellous lot of money, and a fine house in the country, with nice fresh air and constant attendance for you. Horses, carriages, opera-boxes,

months at the sea-side—everything complete. There!"

"Why don't you take it, sweetheart?" said the old woman, with a faint smile.

"Because—I don't say that I shan't take it—there is a condition attached, and such a condition! Not to puzzle you, mother, any more, Count Schönstein wants me to be his wife. Now!"

"Are you serious, Annie?" said Mrs. Christmas, her aged eyes full of astonishment.

"I can't say. I don't think the Count was. You know he is not a witty man, mother, and it *might* be a joke. But if it was a joke, he acted the part admirably—he pulled two leaves out of my photographic album, and nibbled a hole in the table-cover with his nail. He sate *so*, Lady Jane, and said, in a deep bass voice, 'Miss

Brunel, I have 30,000*l.* a year; I am old; I am affectionate; and will you marry me?' Anything more romantic you could not imagine: and the sighs he heaved, and the anxiety of his face, would have been admirable, had he been dressed as 'Orlando,' and playing to my 'Rosalind.' '*For these two hours, Rosalind, I will leave thee.*' '*Alas, dear love, I cannot lack thee two hours!*'"

"Sweetheart, have you grown mad? What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. Must I describe the whole scene to you?—my lover's fearful diffidence, my gentle silence, his growing confidence, my wonder and bewilderment, finally, his half-concealed joy, and my hasty rush to you, Lady Jane, to tell you the news."

"And a pretty return you are making for any man's confidence and affection, to

go on in that way. What did you say to him?"

"Nothing."

"And what do you mean to say?"

"Nothing. What can I say, Lady Jane? I am sure he must have been joking; and, if not, he ought to have been. At the same time, I don't laugh at the Count himself, mother, but at his position a few minutes ago."

"And as you laugh at that, you laugh at the notion of becoming his wife."

The smile died away from the girl's face, and for some time she sate and gazed wistfully before her. Then she said—

"You ought to be able to say what I ought to do, mother. I did not say no, I did not say yes; I was too afraid to say either. And now, if we are to talk seriously about it, I am quite as

much afraid. Tell me what to do, Lady Jane?"

"Is it so entirely a matter of indifference that you can accept my advice?"

"It is quite a matter of indifference," said the girl, calmly.

"Do you love him, Annie?" said the old woman.

For one brief second the girl's thoughts flashed to the man whom she did love; but they returned with only a vague impression of pain and doubt. She had not had time to sit down and reason out her course of duty. She could only judge as yet by the feelings awakened by the Count's proposal, and the pictures which it exhibited to her mind.

"Do I love him, mother?" she said, in a low voice. "I like him very well, and I am sure he is very fond of me; I am quite sure of that."

"And what do you say yourself about it?"

"What can I say? If I marry him," she said, coldly, "it will give him pleasure, and I know he will be kind to me and to you. It is his wish—not mine. We should not be asking or receiving a favour, mother. I suppose he loves me as well as he loves any one; and I suppose I can make as good a wife as any one else."

There was in this speech the faint indication of a bitterness having its root in a far deeper bitterness, which had suggested the whole tone of this interview. When Mrs. Christmas thought the girl was laughing cruelly at a man who had paid her the highest compliment in his power, when she saw this girl exhibiting an exaggerated heartlessness in talking of the proposed marriage as a marriage of convenience, she

did not know that this indifference and heartlessness were but the expression of a deep, and hopeless, and despairing love.

"Poverty is not a nice thing, mother; and until I should have established myself as a teacher of music, we should have to be almost beggars. The Count offers us a pleasant life; and I daresay I can make his dull house a little more cheerful to him. It is a fair bargain. He does not ask me if I loved him; probably he did not see the necessity any more than I do. What he proposes will be a comfortable arrangement for all of us."

Mrs. Christmas looked at the calm, beautiful, sad face, and said nothing.

"I think the Count is an honourable, well-meaning man," continued the girl, in the same cold tone. "If he sometimes makes himself ridiculous, so do most of us;

and doubtless he is open to improvement. I think he is remarkably good-natured and generous, and I am sure he will be kind to us."

Consider Mrs. Christmas's position. An old woman, almost bed-ridden, ailing, and requiring careful and delicate attention,—one who has seen much of the folly of love and much of the power of money,—is asked for her advice by a young girl who is either on the one hand to marry a wealthy, good-natured man, willing to give both a comfortable home, or, on the other hand, to go out alone into the world of London, unprotected and friendless, to earn bread for two people. Even admitting that no grain of selfishness should colour or shape her advice, what was she likely to say?

Ninety-nine women out of a hundred, under such circumstances, would say, "My

dear, be sensible and accept the offer of a worthy and honourable gentleman, instead of exposing yourself to the wretchedness and humiliation of poverty. Romance wont keep you from starving; and besides, in your case, there is no romantic affection to compel you to choose between love and money. People who have come to my time of life know the advantages of securing a happy home and kind friends."

This, too, is probably what Mrs. Christmas would have said—if she had not been born and bred an actress. This is what she did say:—

"My dear" (with a kindly smile on the wan face), "suppose you and I are going forward to the footlights, and I take your hand in mine, and look into your face, and say, 'Listen to the sad story of your mother's life?'"

"Well, Lady Jane?"

"You are supposed to be interested in it, and take its moral deeply to heart. Well, I'm going to tell you a story, sweetheart, although you may not see any moral in it—it's a story your mother knew."

"If she were here now!" the girl murmured, inadvertently.

"When I was three years younger than you, I was first chambermaid in the Theatre Royal, Bristol. Half the pit were my sweethearts; and I got heaps of letters, of the kind that you know, Annie—some of them impudent, some of them very loving and respectful. Sometimes it was, 'My dear Miss, will you take a glass of wine with me at such and such a place, on such and such a night;' and sometimes it was, 'I dare not seek an introduction, lest I read my fate in your refusal. I can only look at

you from afar off, and be miserable.' Poor boys, they were all very kind to me, and used to take such heaps of tickets for my benefits, for in Bristol, you know, the first chambermaid had a benefit like her betters."

"There were none better than you in the theatre, I'm sure, mother," said Annie.

"Don't interrupt the story, my dear; for we are at the footlights, and the gallery is supposed to be anxious to hear it. I declare I have always loved the top gallery. There you find critics who are attentive, watchful, who are ready to applaud when they're pleased, and to hiss when they're not. Well, there was one poor lad, out of all my admirers, got to be acquainted with our little household, and he and I became—friends. He was a wood-engraver, or something like that, only a little older than myself, long

fair hair, a boyish face, gentleness like a girl about him, and nothing would do but that I should engage to be his wife, and he was to be a great artist and do wonders for my sake."

The hard look on the young girl's face had died away now, and there was a dreaminess in her eyes.

"I did promise; and for about two years we were a couple of the maddest young fools in the world—I begging him to make haste, and get money, and marry me—he full of audacious schemes, and as cheerful as a lark in the certainty of marrying me. He tried painting pictures; then he began scene-painting, and succeeded so well that he at last got an engagement in a London theatre, and nearly broke his heart when he went away there to make money for both of us."

The old woman heaved a gentle sigh.

"Whenever I'm very sad, all the wretchedness of that first parting of my life comes over me, and I see the wet streets of Bristol, and the shining lamps, and his piteous face, though he tried to be very brave over it, and cheer me up. I felt like a stone, and didn't know what was going on; I only wished that I could get away into a corner and cry myself dead. Very well, he went, and I remained in Bristol. I needn't tell you how it came about—how I was a little tired of waiting, and we had a quarrel, and, in short, I married a gentleman who had been very kind and attentive to me. He was over thirty, and had plenty of money, for he was a merchant in Bristol, and his father was an old man who had made a fine big fortune in Jamaica. He was very kind to me, in his way; and for a year or two we lived very well together; but I knew that he thought twenty times of his business

for once he thought of me. And what was I thinking of? Ah, Miss Annie, don't consider me very wicked if I tell you that from the hour in which I was married there never passed a single day in which I did not think of the *other one.*"

"Poor mother!" said the girl.

"Every day; and I used to go down on my knees and pray for him, that so I might be sure my interest in him was harmless. We came to London, too; and every time I drove along the streets—I sate in my own carriage then, my dear—I used to wonder if I should see *him.* I went to the theatre in which he was scene-painter, thinking I might catch a glimpse of him from one of the boxes, passing through the wings; but I never did. I knew his house, however, and sometimes I passed it; but I never had the courage to look at the windows, for fear

he should be there. It was very wicked, very wicked, Annie."

"Was your husband kind to you?"

"In a distant sort of way that tormented me. He seemed always to consider me an actress, and a baby; and he invariably went out into society alone, lest I should compromise him, I suppose. I think I grew mad altogether; for one day I left his house resolved never to go back again——"

"And you said he was kind to you!" repeated the girl, with a slight accent of reproach.

"I suppose I was mad, Annie; at any rate I felt myself driven to it, and couldn't help myself. I went straight to the street in which *he* lived, and walked up and down, expecting to meet him. He did not come. I took lodgings in a coffee-house. Next day I went back to that street; even then I did

not see him. On the third afternoon, I saw him come down the steps from his house, and I all at once felt sick and cold. How different he looked now!—firm, and resolute, and manly, but still with the old gentleness about the eyes. He turned very pale when he saw me, and was about to pass on. Then he saw that my eyes followed him, and perhaps they told him something, for he turned and came up to me, and held out his hand, without saying a word."

There were tears in the old woman's eyes now.

"'You forgive me?' I said, and he said 'yes' so eagerly that I looked up again. I took his arm, and we walked on, in the old fashion, and I forgot everything but the old, old days, and I wished I could have died just then. It seemed as if all the hard intervening years had been swept out, and we

were still down in Bristol, and still looking forward to a long life together. I think we were both out of our senses for several minutes; and I shall never forget the light there was on his face and in his eyes. Then he began to question me, and all at once he turned to me, with a scared look, and said—

"'What have you done?'

"It was past undoing then. I knew he loved me at that moment as much as ever, by the terrible state he got into. He implored me to go back to my husband. I told him it was too late. I had already been away two days from home.

"'If I could only have seen you on the day you left your husband's house,' he said, 'this would never have happened. I should have made you go back.'

"Then I began to feel a kind of fear, and I said—

"'What am I to do, Charlie? What are you going to do with me?'

"'I?' he said. 'Do you ask me what I must do? Would you have me leave my wife and children——'"

"I did not know he was married, you see, Miss Annie. Oh, the shame that came over me when I heard these words! The moment before I scarcely knew that I walked at all, so deliriously full of joy I was; *then* I wished the ground would open beneath my feet. He offered to go to my husband and intercede for me; but I would have drowned myself rather than go back. I was the wretchedest woman in the whole world. And I could see that he loved me as much as ever, though he never would say so. That is all of my story that need concern you; but shall I tell you the rest, Miss Annie?"

"Yes, Lady Jane."

"Your mother was then the most popular actress in London; she could do anything she liked in the theatre; and it was for that theatre that *he* chiefly worked then, though he became a great artist afterwards. Well, he took me back to the coffee-house, and left me then; and then he went and persuaded your mother to take an interest in me, and through her means I got an engagement in the same theatre. From the moment I was settled there, he treated me almost like a stranger. He took off his hat to me in the street, and passed on without speaking. If I met him in the theatre, he would say 'Good evening' as he would to the other ladies. He used to send me little presents; and he never forgot my birthday; but they were always sent anonymously, and if I saw him the next day he seemed more distant than ever, as if to keep me away. Oh, many and many a time have

I been on the point of throwing myself at his feet, and clasping his knees, and thanking him with my whole heart for his goodness to me. I used to hate his wife, whom I had never seen, until one Sunday morning I saw her and him going to church, one little girl at his hand, another at hers—and the sweet face she had turned my heart towards her. Would you believe it, he bowed to me as kindly and respectful as ever, and I think he would have stopped and spoken to me *then*, only I hurried away out of his sight."

"And you never went back?" said the girl, softly.

"How could I go back, clothed with shame, and subject myself to his suspicion? Besides, he was the last man to have taken me back. Once he felt sure I had left his house wilfully, I am certain he did not trouble himself much about

me—as why should he?—why should he?"

"It is a very sad story, Lady Jane."

"And it has a moral."

"But not for me. You are afraid I should marry Count Schönstein out of pique, and so be wretched? But there is no other person whom I could marry."

"Come closer to me, sweetheart. There, bend your head down, and whisper. *Is there no other person whom you love?*"

The girl's head was so close down to the pillow that the blush on her face was unseen as she said, in a scarcely audible voice—

"*There is, mother.*"

"I thought so, my poor girl. And he loves you, does he not?"

"He does, Lady Jane. That is the misery of it."

"You think he is not rich enough? He

has his way to make? Or perhaps his friends?"

"You are speaking of——"

"Mr. Anerley."

"But all your conjectures are wrong, mother—all quite wrong. Indeed, I cannot explain it to you. I only know, mother, that I am very unhappy."

"And you mean to marry Count Schönstein to revenge yourself——"

"I did not say I would marry Count Schönstein," said the girl, fretfully, "and I have nothing to revenge. I am very sorry, Lady Jane, to think of the sad troubles you have had; and you are very good to warn me; but I have not quarrelled with anybody, and I am not asked to wait in order to marry anybody, and——"

Here she raised herself up, and the old bitter, hard look came to the sad and gentle face.

"——And if I should marry Count Schönstein, I shall disappoint no one, and break no promise. Before I marry Count Schönstein, he shall know what he may expect from me. I can give him my esteem, and confidence, and a certain amount of liking; and many people have lived comfortably on less. And you, mother, should be the last to say anything against an arrangement which would give you comfort, and relieve your mind from anxiety——"

"And you have lived so long with me," said old Mother Christmas, reproachfully, "and you don't know yet that sooner than let *my* comfort bring you to harm, Annie, or tempt you to a false step, I would twenty times rather beg my bread?"

"Forgive me, mother!" said the girl, impetuously, "but I don't know what I've been saying. Everything seems wrong, and cruel, and if I forget that you have been a

mother to me, it is—it is because—I am—so miserable that——"

And here the two women had a hearty cry together, which smoothed down their troubles for the present, and drew them closer to each other.

CHAPTER V.

LEFT ALONE.

"NO," said Dove, blocking up the doorway with her slight little figure, as the waggonette was driven round, "neither of you stirs a step until you tell me where you are going."

Will's last injunction to his father had been "Don't let the women know." So the women did not know; and on this Monday morning both men were stealthily slipping away up to London when the heroic little Dove caught them in the act.

"We are going to London, my dear," said Mr. Anerley.

"On business," said Will.

"Yes, on business!" said Dove, pouting. "I know what it is. You go into somebody's office in the forenoon and talk a little; and then both of you go away and play billiards; then you dine at Will's club or at a hotel, and then you go to the theatre."

"Will has been telling tales," said Mr. Anerley.

"And to-day of all days," continued the implacable Dove, "when you know very well, papa, and you needn't try to deny it, that you promised to help me in getting down the last of the walnuts. No; neither of you shall stir this day; so you may as well send back the waggonette."

"My dear, the most important business —" said Mr. Anerley, gravely.

"I don't care," said Dove. "If you two people are going up to amuse yourselves in London, you must take me. Else stay at home."

"But how can you go?" said Will. "We have now barely time to catch the train."

"Go by the ten o'clock train," said Dove, resolutely, "and I shall be dressed by then. Or the walnuts, if you like."

"Of the two evils, I prefer to take you," said Will. "So run and get your things ready; and we shall take you to the theatre to-night."

"My boy," said his father, when she was gone, "look at the additional expense——"

"In for a penny, in for a pound, father," said Will. "I shall allow my finances to suffer for the stall-tickets; and you, having just been ruined, ought to be in a position to give us a very nice dinner. People wont believe you have lost your money unless you double your expenditure and scatter money about as freely as dust."

"You both look as if I had thrust myself on you!" said Dove, reproachfully, as they

all got into the waggonette, and drove off. "But I forgive you, as you're going to take me to the theatre. Shall I tell you which, Will? Take me to see Miss Brunel, wont you?"

She looked into his face for a moment; but there was evidently no covert intention in her words.

From Charing Cross station they drove to the Langham Hotel. Dove said she was not afraid to spend an hour or so in looking at the Regent-street and Oxford-street shops, while the gentlemen were gone into the City. At the expiry of that time she was to return to the hotel and wait for them. They then took a Hansom and drove to Mr. Anerley's solicitor.

"And there," said Mr. Anerley, on the way, "as if we were not sufficiently penniless, Hubbard's brougham and a pair of his horses are coming over to-morrow."

"Did you buy them?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"For Dove. I was afraid of her driving in an open vehicle during the winter, as she has been rather delicate all the time you were away. I had calculated on selling the waggonette and Oscar; and now I have the whole lot on my hands."

"How much have you promised him for them?"

"200*l*. I hope he'll let me withdraw from the bargain."

"He wont. I know the Count very well," said the young man. "He is a good fellow in his way, but he wants credit for his goodness. He'll stick to this bargain, because he thinks it advantageous to himself; and *then* he will, with the greatest freedom, lend you the 200*l*., or a larger sum, if you require it. Nor will he lend you

the money at interest; but he will let you know what interest he would have received had he lent it to somebody else."

"Perhaps so. But how to pay him the 200*l.*?

"Tell him, if he does not take back his brougham and horses, you will become bankrupt, and only pay him tenpence in the pound."

Mr. Anerley's solicitor—a stout, cheerful little man—did his very best to look sorrowful, and would probably have shed tears, had he been able, to give effect to his condolences. Any more material consolation he had none. There was no doubt about it: Miall and Welling had wholly collapsed. Ultimately, the lawyer suggested that things might pull together again; but in the meantime shareholders were likely to suffer.

"They do hint queer things about the directors," he continued, "and if what I

hear whispered be true, I'd have some of them put in the stocks until they told what they had done with the money. I'd make 'em disgorge it, sir. Why, sir, men settling their forty or fifty thousand a year on their wives out of money belonging to all sorts of people who have worked for it, who have nothing else to live on, who are likely to starve——"

"My dear sir," said Mr. Anerley, calmly, "you don't look at the matter in its proper light. You don't see the use of such men. You don't reflect that the tendency to excess of reproduction in animals is wholesomely checked by the ravages of other animals. But who is to do that for men, except men? There is, you see, a necessity for human tigers, to prey on their species, kill the weakly members, and improve the race by limiting its numbers and narrowing the conditions of existence."

"That's very nice as a theory, Mr. Anerley; but it wouldn't console me for losing the money that you have lost."

"Because you don't believe in it. Tell me now, how is a penniless man, without a trade, but with some knowledge of the multiplication table, to gain a living in London?"

"There are too many trying to solve the problem, Mr. Anerley," said the lawyer.

"You say there *is* a chance of the bank retrieving itself in a certain time?"

"Yes. I have shown you how the money has been sunk. But in time——"

"Until then, those who are in a position like myself, must contrive to exist somehow."

"That's it."

"Unfortunately, I never settled, as you know, a farthing on my wife; and as for my life-insurance, they illogically and un-

reasonably exclude suicide from their list of casualties. Your ordinary suicide does not compass his own death any more doggedly than the man who persists in living in an undrained house, or in drinking brandy until his brain gives way, or in lighting his pipe in a coal-mine. However, that's neither here nor there. You have been my lawyer, Mr. Green, for a great many years, and you have given me some good advice. But at the most critical moment, I find you without a scrap. Still I bear you no malice; for I don't owe you any money."

"It isn't very easy, sir, to tell a gentleman how to recover his fortune," said Mr. Green, with a smile; glad that his client was taking matters so coolly.

"I was a gentleman three days ago," said Mr. Anerley. "Now I am a man, very anxious to live, and not seeing my way clearly towards that end."

"Come, sir," said Will, "Mr. Green is anxious to live, too; and we are taking up his time."

"But really, Mr. Anerley," said the lawyer, "I should like to know what your views are."

"Ah, you want to know what I propose to do. I am not good at blacking boots. I am indifferent at cookery. Gardening—well, no. I should like to be head-keeper to a duke; or, if they start any more of these fancy stage-coaches between London and the sea-side, I can drive pretty well."

"You are joking," said the other, dubiously.

"A man with empty pockets never jokes, unless he hopes to fill them. At present—well, good day to you—you will let me know if you hear of anything to my advantage."

No sooner were they outside, than Will earnestly remonstrated with his father.

"You should not suddenly lose your pride, sir."

"I never had any, my boy. If I had, it is time I should lose it."

"And why need you talk of taking a situation? If you can only tide over a little time, Miall and Welling will come all right."

"My lad, the bladders that help you to float in that little time are rather expensive."

"I have a few pounds——"

"And you will lend me them. Good. What we must do now is this. Get your landlord to give us a couple of bedrooms in the house, and we can all use your sitting-room. Then we shall be together; and the first opportunity I have offered me of earning money, in whatever employment, I will accept it."

"If I were not disabled, sir, by this con-

founded arm, you would not need to do anything of the kind."

"Tuts! Every man for himself, and all of us for poor Dove, who, at present, will be moping up in that great room, terrified by the attentions of the waiters."

How they passed the day does not matter to us. In the evening they went to the theatre, and chose, at Will's instigation, the dress-circle instead of the stalls. He hoped that he might escape being seen.

He had scarcely cast his eye over the bill handed to him by the box-keeper, when he discovered that Annie Brunel's name was not there at all.

"Dove," he said, "here is a disappointment for you. Miss Featherstone plays 'Rosalind' to-night, not Miss Brunel."

"Doesn't she appear at all to-night?" said Dove, with a crestfallen face.

"Apparently not. Will you go to some other theatre?"

"No," said Dove, decidedly. "I want to see 'Rosalind', whoever is 'Rosalind.' Don't you, papa?"

"My dear, I want to see anything that you want to see; and I'm sure to be pleased if you laugh."

"It isn't a laughing part, and you know that quite well, you tedious old thing," said Dove.

Will went and saw Mr. Melton, from whom he learned little beyond the fact that Annie Brunel did not intend to act any more in his theatre.

"She is not unwell?"

"I believe not."

"Has she given up the stage altogether?"

"I fancy so. You'd better ask Count Schönstein: he seems to know all about

it," said Mr. Melton, with a peculiar smile.

"Why should *he* know all about it?" asked Will, rather angrily: but Melton only shrugged his shoulders.

He returned to his place by Dove's side; but the peculiar meaning of that smile—or rather the possible meaning of it—vexed and irritated him so that he could not remain there. He professed himself tired of having seen the piece so often; and said he would go out for a walk, to cure himself of a headache he had, and return before the play was over.

So he went out into the cool night air, and wandered carelessly on along the dark streets, bearing vaguely westward. He was thinking of many things, and scarcely knew that he rambled along Piccadilly, and still westward, until he found himself in the neighbourhood of Kensington.

Then he stopped; and when he recognised the place in which he stood, he laughed slightly and bitterly.

"Down here, of course. I had persuaded myself I had no wish to go to the theatre beyond that of taking Dove there, and that I was not disappointed when I found she did not play. Well, my feet are honester than my head."

He took out his watch. He had walked down so quickly that there were nearly two hours before he had to return to the theatre. Then he said to himself that, as he had nothing to do, he might as well walk down and take a look at the house which he knew so well. Perhaps it was the last time he might look on it, and know that she was inside.

So he walked in that direction, taking little heed of the objects around him. People passed and repassed along the pavement;

they were to him vague and meaningless shadows, occasionally lit up by the glare of a shop window or a lamp. Here and there he noticed some tall building, or other object, which recalled old scenes and old times; and, indeed, he walked on in a kind of dream, in which the past was as clearly around him as the present.

At the corner of the street leading down to the smaller street, or square, in which Annie Brunel lived, there was a chemist's shop, with large windows looking both ways. Also at the corner of the pavement was a lamp, which shed its clear orange light suddenly on the faces of the men and women who passed.

He paused there for a moment, uncertain whether to turn or venture on, when a figure came out of the shop which—without his recognising either the dress or the face—startled him and made him involuntarily

withdraw a step. It was the form, perhaps, or the motion, that told him who it was; at all events he knew that she herself was there, within a few yards of him. He did not know what to do. There was a vague desire in his heart to throw to the wind all considerations, his promise, his duty to one very dear to him; but he only looked apprehensively at her. It was all over in a second—in half a second. She caught sight of him, shrank back a little, uncertain, trembling, and then appeared as if she were about to pass on. But the great yearning in both their hearts suddenly became master of the situation; for, at the same moment, apparently moved by the same impulse, they advanced to each other, he caught her hands in his, and there was between them only one intense look of supreme and unutterable joy.

Such a look it is given to most men to

receive once or twice—seldom oftener—in their lives. It is never to be forgotten. When a strong revulsion of feeling, from despondency and despair to the keen delight of meeting again, draws away from a girl's eyes that coy veil of maiden bashfulness that generally half-shrouds their light, when the spirit shines full and frank there, no disguise being longer possible, and it seems as if the beautiful eyes had speech in them—but how is it possible to describe such a moment in cold and brittle words? The remembrance of one such meeting colours a man's life. You know that when you have lain and dreamed of enjoying companionship with one hopelessly separated from you—of seeing glad eyes you can never see again, and hearing sweet talk that you can never again hear—you rise with a confused sense of happiness, as if the morning air were full of tender thrills—you still hear the voice, and

you seem to be walking by the side of the sea, and there is sunshine and the sound of waves abroad. That dizzy remembrance, in itself a perplexing, despairing joy, is something like the thought of such a moment and such a look as that I speak of, when one glances backward, after long years, and wonders how near heaven earth has been.

When she went towards him, and looked up into his face, and when they walked away together, there was no thought of speech between them. Silence being so full of an indescribable joy, why should they break it? It was enough that they were near each other—that, for the present, there was no wide and mournful space between them, full of dim longings and bitter regrets. To-morrow was afar off, and did not concern them.

"Did you come to see me?" she said at last, very timidly.

"No."

Another interval of supreme silence, and then he said—

"Have you got quite reconciled yet? I was afraid of seeing you—of meeting you; but now it seems as if it were a very harmless pleasure. Do you remember the last terrible night?"

"There is no use talking of that," she said; "and yet we ought not to meet each other—except—you know——"

"As friends, of course," he said, with a smile. "Well, Annie, we shan't be enemies; but I do think myself it were rather more prudent, you understand, that we should not see each other—for a long time, at least. Now, tell me, why are you not at the theatre?"

"I have given up the theatre."

"You do not mean to act any more?"

"No."

There suddenly recurred to him Mr. Melton's significant smile; and dead silence fell upon him. If there could be anything in the notion that the Count——

Clearly, it was no business of his whether she married the Count or no. Nay, if it were possible that her marriage with the Count should blot out certain memories, he ought to have been rejoiced at it. And yet a great dread fell upon him when he thought of this thing; and he felt as though the trusting little hand which was laid upon his arm had no business there, and was an alien touch.

"But," he said, in rather an embarrassed way, "if you have given up the theatre, it must have been for some reason——"

"For the reason that I could not bear it a moment longer."

"And now——"

"Now I am free."

"Yes, of course, free; but still—what do you propose to do?"

"I don't know yet. I have been looking at some advertisements——"

"Have you actually no plan whatever before you?" he said, with surprise—and yet the surprise was not painful.

"*None.*"

"Why," he said, "we have all of us got into a nice condition, just as in a play. I shouldn't wonder if the next act found the whole of us in a garret, in the dead of winter, of course."

"What do you mean?"

"My father has lost all his money, and doesn't know where to turn to keep his household alive. I——"

Here he stopped.

"Ah," she said, "and you find yourself unable to help them because of your arm."

"That will soon be better," he said,

cheerfully, "and we will try not to starve. But you—what are you going to do? You do not know people in London; and you do not know the terrible struggle that lies in wait for any unaided girl, trying to make a living."

"So the Count says."

"Oh, you have told the Count?"

"Yes."

"What did he suggest?"

"He thinks I ought to marry him," she said, frankly.

"*You* marry *him?*"

"Yes. That was the only way, I dare say, in which he thought he could be of service to me. He really is so very kind, and thoughtful, and unselfish."

"And you answered——"

He uttered these words with an air of forced carelessness. He wished her to understand that he would be rather glad if she

thought well of the proposal. For a moment she looked at him, questioningly, as if to ask whether there was honest advice in that tone, and then she said, slowly—

"I said neither yes nor no. At the moment I did not know what to think. I —I knew that he would be kind to me, and that—he knew—that I liked him pretty well—as an acquaintance——"

"And you have not decided whether you ought to make the Count happy or no?"

The false cheerfulness of his voice did not deceive her.

"Yes, I have decided," she said, in a low voice.

"And you will——"

"Why not be frank with me?" she said, passionately, and turning to him with imploring eyes. "Why speak like that?—would you not despise me if I married that man?—would I not despise myself? You

see I talk to you frankly, for you are my friend: I could not marry him—I dare not think of my being his *wife*. I shall never be his wife—I shall never be any man's wife."

"Annie, be reasonable——"

"Perhaps it is not to you I should say that, and yet I know it. I am ashamed of myself when I think that I let him go away with the thought that I *might* accept his offer. But then I had not decided—I did not see it properly, not until I looked in your face to-night."

"It seems that I must always come between you and happiness."

"Do you call that happiness? But I must go back now; poor Lady Jane is rather worse to-day, and I was at the chemist's with a prescription from the doctor when I met you. I hope we have not done wrong in speaking to each other."

So they went back, and he bade her farewell tenderly, and yet not so sadly as at their former parting.

It seemed to him as he passed away from the door, that he heard a faint sharp cry from inside the house. He took no notice of it however. He was already some distance off when he heard swift footsteps behind him, and then the maid-servant of the house, breathless and wild-eyed, caught him by the arm.

"Oh, sir, please come back; Mrs. Christmas is dead, sir! and the young missis is in such a dreadful state!"

He at once hurried back, and found that the terrible intelligence was too true. Annie Brunel seemed almost to have lost her senses,—so bitterly did she reproach herself for having neglected the bedside of her old friend.

"She was well enough, ma'am, when you

went out," the servant maintained, consoling her mistress, "and there was nothing you could have done. I was in the room, and she asked for those letters as always lies in that drawer, ma'am; and when I took them over to her she tried to put up her hand, and then she sank back, and in a minute it was all over. What could you have done, ma'am? She couldn't ha' spoken a word to you."

But the girl was inconsolable, and it was past midnight when Will left her, having wholly failed in his efforts to soothe the bitterness of her grief and desolation.

CHAPTER VI.

THE COUNT EXPLAINS.

WHEN Will returned to the hotel he found his father waiting up for him alone. He was too much overcome by the terrible scene he had just witnessed to make any but the barest apology for his discourtesy, and even that his father interrupted as unnecessary.

"I left the theatre early," he said, gloomily. "Dove was feverish and unwell. I think she must have caught cold when coming up with us in the morning. When I got her here her cheeks were flushed and hot, and I saw that she was restless and languid by turns; in short, very feverish."

"Did you send for a doctor?"

"Oh, no; there was nothing one could speak to him about. To-morrow morning, if these symptoms are not gone, it might be advisable to consult some one."

They sate up very late that night discussing their future plans. There were but two alternatives before them. It was considered possible that with a few thousand pounds Mr. Anerley could meet present liabilities, and wait over for the time at which it was hoped the affairs of the bank would, through the realization of certain securities, be in a fair way of recovery. If, on the other hand, this present money was not forthcoming, the only course for Mr. Anerley was to remove from St. Mary-Kirby to London, and try to find some means of subsistence in the great city.

"There is only Hubbard of all my old acquaintances in a position to help me," said

Mr. Anerley; "and he is the last whom I should like to ask for any such favour."

"I think you are inclined to misjudge the Count, sir," said Will; "and in this case you ought at least to see what he has to say before impeaching his good feeling. After all, you will find a good many men with as much money as the Count, and as little to spend it on, quite as unwilling to oblige an old friend as you half expect him to be."

After a good deal of argument, it was arranged that Mr. Anerley should see the Count on the following morning. Will forced him to this decision by a long description of what would fall upon the St. Mary-Kirby household in the event of his refusal.

"What is your pride compared with their wretchedness?" he said.

"My boy," he replied, "I have no pride except when I have a good gun in my hand

and a good dog working bravely in front of me. Further, do you know so little of your own family as to think that poverty, the nightmare of novelists, would be so appalling to them?"

"Not to them, perhaps; but to you, looking at them."

And that was true of the Chesnut Bank household. Misfortune was as bitter to them as to any other family; only it was for one another that they grieved. They had been educated into a great unselfishness through the constant kindly and half-mocking counsel of the head of the house; but that unselfishness only embittered misfortune. They did not brood over their individual mishaps, but they exaggerated the possible effects of misfortune on each other, and shared this imaginary misery. Mr. Anerley was not much put out by the knowledge that henceforth he would scarcely have the

wherewithal to keep himself decently clothed; but it was only when he thought of Dove being deprived of her port wine, and of Mrs. Anerley being cabined up in London lodgings (though these two were as careless of these matters as he about his matters) that he vowed he would go and see Count Schönstein, and beg him for this present assistance.

"As for Dove, poor girl," he said to Will, "you know what riches she prizes. You know what she craves for. A look from one she loves is riches to her; you can make her as wealthy as an empress by being kind to her."

"I'm sure no one ever could be unkind to *her*," said Will.

But the visit to Count Schönstein was postponed next morning; for Dove was worse than on the previous night and was fain to remain in bed. Of course, a physi-

cian was called in. He had a long talk with Mr. Anerley, afterwards; and perhaps it was his manner, more than anything he actually said, that disquieted Dove's guardian. What he actually did say was that the young girl was evidently very delicate; that on her tender constitution this slight febrile attack might lead to graver consequences; and that she must at once have careful, womanly nursing and country air. *Per se*, her ailment was not of a serious character.

Mrs. Anerley was at once telegraphed for. Under the circumstances, they did not care to remove Dove to St. Mary-Kirby, with the chance of her having to return a few days afterwards to London.

"And if I had any misgivings about asking the Count to lend me the money," said Mr. Anerley, "I have none now. If country air is necessary to Dove's health,

country air she shall have somehow or other."

"If we cannot manage *that*, sir," said Will, "we had better go and bury ourselves for a couple of imbeciles."

So it was on the next morning that Mr. Anerley went to Count Schönstein's house in Bayswater. He went early; and found that the Count had just breakfasted. He was shown up to the drawing-room.

It was a large and handsome apartment, showily and somewhat tawdrily furnished. A woman's hand was evidently wanted in the place. The pale lavender walls, with their stripes of delicately-painted panelling, were scratched and smudged here and there; the chintz coverings of the couches and chairs were ragged and uneven; and the gauzy drapery of the chandeliers and mirrors was about as thick with dust as the ornate books which lay uncovered on the

tables. There were a hundred other little points which a woman's eye would have detected, but which, on the duller masculine perception, only produced a vague feeling of uncomfortable disorder and want of cleanliness.

The Count entered in a gorgeously-embroidered dressing-gown, above the collar of which a black satin neckerchief was tied round his neck in a series of oily folds.

"Good morning, Anerley," he said, in his grandest manner—so grand, indeed, that his visitor was profoundly surprised. Indeed, the Count very rarely attempted seignorial airs with his Chesnut Bank neighbour.

"Good morning," said Mr. Anerley, somewhat coldly. "I called on business matters, and shall not detain you Business matters they are in one sense, but not in another. You know of Miall and Welling being down."

"I told your son of it."

"Do you know the position of their affairs?"

"As much as my neighbours do, I imagine."

"And would that knowledge induce you to do me the very great service of lending me some money for a certain time? I believe they will pull through—in any case, as I need scarcely tell you, your money is safe. Frankly, this blow has fallen upon me when I was quite unprepared; and unless I can find some means of staving off the necessity for a little while, I shall have to leave St. Mary-Kirby and try to find some means of subsistence in London. *That* I shouldn't mind so much, if it were not for poor Dove, who has been taken unwell and must have country air. You see, then, what urgent need I have to ask you for this kindness."

The Count folded his arms behind his back, and said, in his stateliest manner—

"Mr. Anerley, you come to me for assistance: why don't you look to your own son?"

The old man regarded the strange figure opposite him with some puzzled curiosity. Then he rose with a good-natured smile on his face.

"Thanks for your candour, Count," he said. "I ventured to ask this obligation simply——"

"But stay, Mr. Anerley, don't imagine I refuse you the money——"

"My dear sir, the tone of your apology is sufficient——"

"D—n it, Anerley, be reasonable," cried the Count, irritated into being natural. "I want to tell you something you don't know anything about. You have lost all your money through Miall and Welling—in the

meantime. Naturally, you ought to look to your son for help. I don't suppose he is very rich; but still it is his duty, you know, to do what he can. Very well. He is in the same predicament as you—he has the misfortune to be deprived of his means of living. In that case, what might one expect?"

The Count waved his hand in triumphantly bringing this speech to a conclusion.

"I'm not good at riddles," said Mr. Anerley, quietly, "and really you must excuse me if I say that I don't see what all that has to do with——"

"Spare me another minute. Where was your son the night before last—all the evening—when you were in the theatre?"

"I don't know."

"I do. While he should have been attending to you and that poor girl who you say is unwell—when he should have been

thinking of how he could increase his income and devote it to your needs—he was dancing attendance on an actress who, I dare say, will be either his wife or his mistress, accordingly as he finds it convenient. Not only that, but he has ruined the girl in her profession. He has caused her to abandon the stage, and she is now in a condition bordering on beggary, yet such is her infatuation for him that she will not accept assistance. And this is the man in whose stead you would have me stand. I am to lend you money that he may continue unchecked in his licentious courses. A month ago—a week ago—would I have believed this of him? No. But I have found him out—I have found out the long course of hypocrisy which came to a climax on the night before last, when he kept the wretched girl wandering about the streets, while her guardian—the only inti-

mate friend she had in the world—was lying dying at home."

Mr. Anerley remained calm and impassive until the Count had finished his last sentence. Then he said, with a cold preciseness which suited the ill-concealed scorn on his features—

"I ventured, Count Schönstein, to ask you for a favour. In reply, you utter a number of calumnies against my son; and you evidently expect that I shall believe them. Well, you see, sir, I have known him, boy and man, for a good many years now; and habit leads me to think that you have been uttering a series of audacious falsehoods. You will bear with my candour, as I bore with yours. And let me add a piece of advice: when you next accuse a son to his father, be sure the son is present, or the father may think of the accuser—what I need not suggest to you. Good morning."

Wherewith the old man walked out of the room, and down the broad stairs, and out of the great, empty house. He was a little angry, doubtless, and there was a contemptuous curl on his lips as he strode down the street; but these feelings soon subsided into a gentler sadness as he thought of Dove and the chances of her getting country air.

He looked up at the large houses on both sides of him, and thought how the owners of these houses had only to decide between one sheltered sea-side village and another, between this gentle climate and that gentler one, for pleasure's sake, while he, with the health of his darling in the balance, was tied down to the thick and clammy atmosphere of the streets. And then he thought of how many a tramp, footsore and sickeningly hungry, must have looked up at Chesnut Bank and wondered why God had given all his good things—sweet food, and grateful

wine, and warm clothing, and pleasant society, and comfortable sleep—to the occupant of that pleasant-looking place. It was now his turn to be envious; but it was for Dove alone that he coveted a portion of their wealth.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DECISION.

DARK as was the night on which Will and Annie Brunel had wandered along the lonely pavements of Kensington, they had not escaped observation. On whatever errand he was bent, Count Schönstein happened to be down in that neighbourhood on this night; and while these two were so much engaged in mutual confidences as scarcely to take notice of any passer-by, the Count had perceived them and determined to watch them.

This he did during the whole of the time they remained outside. What he gathered

from his observations was not much. At another time he would have paid little attention to their walking together for an hour or two; but that at this very time, when she was supposed to be considering whether she would become the Count's wife, she should be strolling about at night with one who was evidently on very intimate terms with her—this awakened the Count's suspicions and wrath. But the more he watched, the more he was puzzled. They did not bear the demeanour of lovers; yet what they said was evidently of deep interest to them both. There was no self-satisfied joy in their faces—rather an anxious and tender sadness; and yet they seemed to find satisfaction in this converse, and were evidently in no hurry to return to the house.

Once Miss Brunel had returned to the house, the Count relinquished further watch. He therefore did not witness Will's recal.

But he had seen enough greatly to disquiet him; and as he went homeward he resolved to have a clear understanding with Miss Brunel on the following morning. He believed he had granted her sufficient time to make up her mind; and, undoubtedly, when he came to put the question point-blank, he found that her mind was made up.

Briefly, she gave him to understand that she never could, and that she never would, be his wife. Perhaps she announced her determination all the more curtly in that her sorrow for the loss of Mrs. Christmas seemed to render the Count's demand at such a moment an insult.

The poor Count was in a dreadful way. In this crisis he quite forgot all about the reasons which had first induced him to cultivate Annie Brunel's society, and honestly felt that if her present decision were per-

severed in, life was of no further use or good to him.

"I am sorry," she said, "I have given you pain. But you asked me to speak plainly, and I have done so."

"You have so astonished me—your tone when we last saw each other at least gave me the right to anticipate——"

"There I have to beg for your forgiveness. I was very wrong. I did not know my own mind—I could come to no decision."

"May I venture to ask what enabled you to come to a decision?"

"I would rather not answer the question," she replied, coldly.

"Will you tell me if your mind was made up yesterday morning?" he asked, insidiously.

"It was not. But pray, Count Schönstein, don't say anything more about this at

present. Consider the position I am in just now——"

"I only wish to have a few words from you for my further guidance, Miss Brunel," he said. "You came to this decision last night. Last night you saw Mr. Anerley. Have I not a right to ask you if he had anything to do with it?"

"You have no such right," she said, indignantly.

"Then I take your refusal to mean that he had. Are you aware that he is engaged to be married? Do you know that he is a beggar, and his father also? Do you know——"

"I hope I may be allowed to be free from insult in my own house," she said, as she rose and—with a wonderful dignity, and pride, and grace that abashed and awed him—walked out of the room.

A dim sort of compunction seized him,

and he would willingly have followed her and begged her to pardon what he had said. Then he, too, felt a little hurt, remembering that he was a Count, and she an actress. Finally, he quietly withdrew, found a servant at the door waiting to let him out, and departed from the house with a heavy heart.

"A woman's 'no' generally means 'yes,'" he said to himself, disconsolately trying to extract comfort from the old proverb.

He would not despair. Perhaps the time had been inopportune. Perhaps he should have postponed the crisis, when he learned of Mrs. Christmas's death. Then he reflected that he had been so intent on his own purpose as to forget to offer the most ordinary condolences.

"That is it," he said. "She is offended by my having spoken at such a time."

The Count was a shifty man, and invari-

ably found hope in the mere fact of having something to do. There was yet opportunity to retrieve his blunder. So he drove to the office of Cayley and Hubbard, and found his meek brother sitting in his room.

"I never come to see you except when I am in trouble," said the Count, with a grim smile.

"I am always glad to see you, Frederick. What is your trouble now?"

"Oh, the old affair. She has left the theatre, as you know; she has lost that old woman; she is quite alone and penniless; and, this morning, when I offered to make her my wife, she said no."

"What were her reasons?"

"A woman never has any. But I think I vexed her in making the proposal when the corpse was lying in the next room. It was rather rum, wasn't it? And then she had been crying, and very likely did not

wish to be disturbed. However, I don't despair. No. Look at her position. She *can't live* unless she accepts assistance from me."

"Unless——"

Mr. John Hubbard did not complete the sentence, but his face twitched more nervously than ever.

"Who *could* tell her?" asked the Count, angrily.

"She may get assistance from those other people——"

"The Anerleys?" replied the Count, with a splendid laugh. "Why, man, every penny of old Anerley's money is with Miall and Welling. Safe keeping there, eh? Bless you, she has no alternative—except this, that she's sure to run off and disappear suddenly in some wild attempt at becoming a governess. I know she means something that way."

"And then you'll lose sight of her," said the thin-faced brother, peering into the slip of grey sky visible through the small and dusty window.

What *his* thoughts were at this moment he revealed to his wife at night.

"My dear," he said, in dulcet tones, "I am afraid my brother is a very selfish man, and wants to get this poor girl's money. If she were to become friends with *us*, we might guard her against him. Indeed, it might only be fair to tell her what money awaits her whenever she chooses to take it; and perhaps, you know, Jane, she might give a little present to the children, out of gratitude, you know."

"A few thousand pounds would be nothing to *her*, John," said the wife, thinking of her darling boys.

"And Fred's money he's sure to keep to himself. He seems to have no idea that his family have claims upon him."

However, to return to the Count, he then proceeded to unfold to his brother the plan he had conceived for the entrapping of this golden-crested wren which was so likely to fly away.

"All the little money she may have saved will be swallowed up in the funeral expenses. After that—what? Music-lessons, or French, or something. Very good. I know she has been already watching the advertisements in the *Times*. Now what I want you to do is this—publish an advertisement which will attract her attention, and secure her as a governess."

The two men had thought of the same thing, at the same moment, each for his own purpose. But John Hubbard suddenly began to fear that he would be made a cat's-paw of by his more favoured brother.

"The name, Frederick, might suggest to her——"

"I don't think she knows my personal name," said the Count, coldly. "Besides, you would not advertise as Cayley and Hubbard, which might remind her of *one* resource open to her, and you would not advertise as my brother, which would frighten her away. Let Jane advertise—she will do it better than either of us; and if it is necessary to get rid of your present governess, you can give her some small *solatium*, which I will repay you."

This was the advertisement which was finally concocted between them—

"*Wanted, a Governess. Must be thoroughly proficient in music and French. One who could assist in arranging private theatricals preferred. Apply,*" *&c. &c.*

It was submitted by Mr. John Hubbard to the inspection of his wife; and the mild, fat, pretty little woman approved of it.

"That is how I fancy we might get ac-

quainted with her, my dear; and you know Frederick dare not come near the house at first, or she would be frightened away at once. Then, you know, we could be very kind to her, and make her grateful. She ought to be grateful, considering her position."

Jane acquiesced, but was not hopeful. She had heard her husband frequently speak of the strange things he encountered in his professional career; but she had never herself seen any of them. She did not believe, therefore, that any portion of a romance could be enacted in her prosaic house.

"It would be very nice," she said to her husband, "if it all came right; and we were to be friends with such a rich lady, and if she would only give the children something to make them independent of their uncle Frederick. I'm not fond of

money for its own sake; but for the children, my dear——"

"Yes, the children are to be considered," said John, wondering whether his pretty, placid, good-natured little wife believed that he believed that she believed what she said.

"I am sure a lady so well-born will be a charming companion," said Mrs. John, "whether she has been an actress or not."

"And we must change the sherry," said her husband.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONFESSION.

BY the time that Mrs. Anerley arrived, Dove was sufficiently well to suffer removal from the hotel; and as there was now no help for it, the whole family removed to those rooms which Will had engaged for them from his landlord. The position of affairs had now to be disclosed; and with all the cheerfulness and mutual consolation they could muster, the prospect seemed doleful enough. Every one seemed to be chiefly concerned for Dove, and Dove was the least concerned of all. She put her arm round Mr. Anerley's neck, as he bent over

the couch on which she lay, and whispered to him—

"You have lost all your shooting, poor papa."

"Yes."

"But then you have me. I'm as good as the biggest partridge you ever saw, am I not?"

"I think you are, darling."

"And you have lost all your fishing, poor papa."

"Yes, that too."

"But did you ever get a trout to kiss you as I do?"

Which was followed by the usual caress.

"And you wont have such lots of wine; but you know, papa, how angry you used to be when people did not appreciate what *you* thought was good."

"And where is my little Dove to get her port-wine after dinner on Sunday?" said he.

"You'll see, papa. Just after dinner, when we're all sitting at the table, and you are looking sadly at the dry walnuts, and everybody is thinking about the nice Sundays down in the country, you know, there will be a little rustling, and a little murmur of music in the air—somewhere near the roof—and all at once two bottles of wine will be hung round your neck by the fairies —for it's only you who care about it, you know—and everybody will laugh at you. That is the punishment for thinking about port-wine. Do I want port-wine? You're an old cheat, papa, and try to make me believe I am ill that you may have your port-wine on Sunday. But I'm not, and I wont have any extravagance."

He, with a great pain at his heart, saw the forced look of cheerfulness on her sweet face, and made some abominable vow about

selling his mother's marriage-ring before Dove should want her port-wine.

Dove was really so well, however, when Mrs. Anerley came, that the anxious and tender mamma was almost at a loss how to expend the care and sympathy with which she had charged herself. It was at this juncture that Will proposed that Mr. and Mrs. Anerley should go and see Annie Brunel, and give her what comfort and assistance lay in their power. And no sooner were the circumstances of the girl's position mentioned, than both at once, and gladly, consented.

"But why not come with us?" said his mother.

"I would rather you went by yourselves. She will be only too grateful if you go to see her. She does not know how to manage a funeral. Then she is alone; you will be able to speak to her better

than I, and in any case I must remain with Dove."

So they went, and when they were gone Dove asked him to come and seat himself beside her couch. She put out her little white hand to him, and he noticed that her eyes were singularly large and clear. They were fixed upon him with the old tender sadness, and he was forced to think of the time when heaven itself seemed open to him in those beautiful, transparent depths. But why should they be sad? He remembered the old delight of them, the mystery of them, the kindness of them; and perhaps he thought that in a little time he would be able to awaken the old light in them, and rejoice in the gladness, and be honestly, wholly in love with his future wife.

"Why didn't you go with them?" she asked.

"And leave you alone?"

He could have wished that those eyes were less frank and less penetrating.

"Sometimes I fancy, Will, that you think me a great baby, and that there is no use explaining things to me, and that I am only to be petted and treated like a child. And so you have always petted me, like the rest, and I liked it very well, as you know. But if I am to be your wife, Will, you mustn't treat me as a child any more."

"Would you like to be old and wise and motherly, Dove? How must I treat you? You know you are only a poor little child, my dearest; but then when we marry, you will suddenly grow very old."

There was no glad pleasure and hope in his voice, and doubtless she caught the tone of his speech, for the large eyes were absent and troubled.

"You are not frank with me, Will," she said, in a low voice. "You wont explain the

difference there has been in you ever since you came back from Germany. Ah, such a difference!" she added, with a sigh, and her eyes were withdrawn from his face. "Perhaps I only imagine it, but everything seems altered. We are not to each other what we used to be: you are kinder than ever, I think, and you want to be what you were; but something has come between us, Will."

Every word she uttered lacerated his heart, for how could he look upon the patient, kind, sweet face, and tell a lie?—and how dared he tell the truth?

"Come closer, Will. Bend your head down, and I'll whisper something to you. It is this: Ever since you came back from Germany I have been wretched without knowing why. Many a time I was going to tell you; then you always looked as if you were not as much my friend as you used to be, and I dared not do it. You

have not been frank with me, and I have seen it often and often as I have watched you, and my heart used to lie cold and still like lead. And oh, Will, do you know what I've been thinking—I've been thinking that you don't love me any more!"

She turned away her agonized face from him, and a slight shudder ran through her frame.

"Dove, listen to me——"

"And if it is true, Will," she said, with trembling lips, her face still being turned from him, "if it is true, don't tell me that it is, Will; how could I bear to hear you say that? I should only wish to die at once, and be out of everybody's way—out of your way, too, Will, if I am in the way. I never expected to talk like this to you—never, never; for I used to think—down there in St. Mary-Kirby, you know—that you could never do anything but love me,

and that we should always go on the same wherever we were. But things are all changed, Will. It was never the same after you left the last time, and since you have come back, they have changed more and more. And now up here in London, it seems as if all the old life were broken away, and we two had only been dreaming down there. And I have been sick at heart, and wretched; and when I found myself ill the other day, I wished I might die."

He had destroyed that beautiful world; and he knew it, although there was no chorus of spirits to sing to him—

"Weh! weh!
Du hast sie zerstört,
Die schöne Welt!
Mit mächtiger Faust;
Sie stürzt, sie zerfällt!
* * * * *
Prächtiger
Baue sie wieder
In deinen Busen baue sie auf!
Neuen Lebenslauf

Beginne,
Mit hellem Sinne
Und neue Lieder
Tönen darauf!"

Was it possible for him to build it up again, and restore the old love and the old confidence? It was not until this heartbroken wail was wrung from the poor girl that he fully saw the desolation that had fallen upon them. Bitterly he accused himself of all that had happened, and vainly he looked about for some brief solace he might now offer her.

"You don't say anything," she murmured, "because you have been always kind to me, and you do not wish to pain me. But I know it is true, Will, whether you speak or not. Everything is changed now —everything; and—and I've heard, Will, that when one is heartbroken, one dies."

"If you do not wish to break my heart, Dove, don't talk like that," he said, beside

himself with despair and remorse. "See, give me your hand, and I'll tell you all about it. Turn your eyes to me, dearest. We are a little changed, I know; but what does it matter? So soon as ever we can, we shall marry, Dove; and then the old confidence will come back again. I have been away so much from you that we have lost our old familiarity; but when we are married, you know——"

Then she turned, and the beautiful violet eyes were once more reading his face.

"You *wish* us to be married, Will?"

"My darling, I do," he said, eagerly, honestly, joyously—for in the mere thought that thereby he *might* make some reparation there lay peace and assurance for the future. "I wish that we could be married to-morrow morning."

She pressed his hand, and lay back on the cushion with a sigh. There was a pale,

wan pleasure in her face, and a satisfied languor in her eyes.

"I think I shall make a very good wife," she said, a little while after, with the old smile on her face. "But I shall have to be petted, and cared for, and spoiled, just as before. I don't think I should wish to be treated differently if I knew you were frank with me, and explained your griefs to me, and so on. I wished, darling, to be older, and out of this spoiling, because I thought you considered me such a baby——"

"You will be no longer a baby when you are married. Think of yourself as a married woman, Dove!—the importance you will have—the dignity you will assume. Think of yourself presiding over your own tea-table—think of yourself choosing a house down near Hastings, and making wonderful arrangements with the milkman, and the butcher; and getting into a terrible rage

when they forget your orders, and blaming all their negligence on me."

"My dear, I don't think I shall have anything to do with butchers and milkmen."

"Why?"

"Because I don't think you will ever have any money to pay them with."

"So long as I have only one arm with which to work for you, Dove, you must learn to live on little; but still——"

"I shall not want much, shall I, if I have you beside me to make me forget that I am hungry? But it all looks like a dream, just like what is past. Are they both dreams, dearest? Were those real times down in the old house, when you and I used to sit together, or walk out together, over the common, you know, and over the bridge by the mill-head, and away over the meadows down by that strip of wood, and

so on, and so on, until we came to the river again, and the road, and Balnacluith House, and the deer park. How pleasant it was, in the summer evenings; but that seems so long ago!"

"How sad you have been these last few days, Dove!"

"Because I have been thinking, Will. And all that seems a dream, and all that is coming seems a dream, and there is nothing real but just now, and then I find you and me estranged from each other. Ah, yes, Will, you are very kind in speaking of our marriage; but we are not now what we were once."

"Dove," he said, with a desperate effort, "I cannot bear this any longer. If you go on moping like this, you will kill yourself. It is better you should know all the truth at once—you will listen, dearest, and forgive me, and help me to make the best we can of the future."

There was a quick sparkle of joy in her eyes.

"Oh, Will, Will, are you going to tell me all *now?*"

"Yes, dearest."

"Then you needn't speak a word—not a word—for I know you love me after all. Perhaps not altogether; but quite enough to satisfy me, Will, and I am so glad—so glad."

She burst into tears, and hid her face from him.

He scarcely knew whether grief or joy was the cause of this emotion; but in a minute or two she said—

"I am going to whisper something to you. You fell in love with Miss Brunel when you were over in Germany, and you found it out when it was too late, and you did not know what to do. Your kindness brought you back to me, though your

thoughts were with her. Is it not all true I have been telling you? And I was afraid it would be so always, and that you and I were parted for ever; for you hid the secret from me, and dared not tell me. But the moment I saw in your eyes that you were going to tell me, I knew some of the old love must be there—some of our old confidence; and now—now—oh, my darling, I can trust you with my life, and my heart, and all the love I can offer you."

"You have spoken the truth, Dove," he said, and he knew that her supreme womanly instinct had not lied to her, "and you have made me happier than I have been for many a day. You do not blame me much for what is past and gone? And you see that after all the old love may come back between us; and you will help me to bring it back, and keep it safe."

"And I will be a true wife to you, Will."

She fixed her eyes gravely and earnestly upon him. Then she lifted his hand to her lips, and—bethinking herself, perhaps, of some quaint foreign custom of which she may have heard—she kissed it, in token of meek submission and wifely self-surrender.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BAIT IS TAKEN.

MRS. ANERLEY felt very nervous in going to visit Miss Brunel. She had never seen an actress in private life; and, on the stage, this particular actress had seemed so grand and majestic—so thoroughly out of and beyond the ordinary sphere of every-day existence,—that she almost feared to approach so glorious a creature.

She was very particular about her dress; and perhaps she inwardly composed a few phrases to break the difficulty of introduction.

But there was no awkwardness where

Mr. Anerley was concerned. He went forward, and took the girl by the hand, and told her, in as gentle a way as possible, the object of their mission. She was apparently much touched by this sign of their thoughtfulness and goodness; and said so briefly. Mrs. Anerley forgot all her prepared little speeches. While her husband talked to Annie Brunel, she stood and watched the strange intensity of the girl's large, dark grey eyes. There was no embarrassment there, and no scanning of the embarrassment of others; they were too absent, and yet full of a strong personal feeling which showed itself as she accepted, with great gratitude, Mr. Anerley's offer.

"There is one other thing you ought to do," he said. "Get away from the house at once."

"If we could only have asked you to come down to our house in the country for

a few days," said Mrs. Anerley, in her kindly way, "that would have been the best thing for you, and a great pleasure to us."

"You would have asked me to visit your home?" said the young girl, suddenly flashing her clear, honest eyes on Mrs. Anerley's face.

"Yes—why not?" said Mrs. Anerley, almost in fright, fancying she had committed herself.

"You are very kind indeed," said Annie Brunel. "Actresses are not accustomed to such kindness—especially from strangers."

"But you mustn't call us strangers," said Mr. Anerley, good-naturedly. "We have the pleasure of knowing you very well; and in a few days we hope you will know something of us, if we can be of any service to you. To live in this house, alone, with these sad remembrances, is very

unwise; and, in a day or two, you must leave it."

"Yes, I must leave it—because I must go where I can earn my bread. Has your son told you, sir, that I have left the stage? So I have; but at present I have no clear idea of what I must do—and yet I must do something."

"I am afraid you have placed yourself in a very perilous position," said Mr. Anerley.

"But I got to dislike the stage so much that I had to leave it."

"Why *you* should have left the stage!" exclaimed Mrs. Anerley, in open admiration, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Annie Brunel looked at her for a moment, and said, slowly—

"I have been very fortunate in giving you a good impression of myself. I thought most ladies outside the theatre looked down upon us theatre folk; and I was afraid you

had come here only at your son's solicitation, with a sort of——"

"Ah, don't say any more," said Mrs. Anerley, with a genuine pain on her face. "It is not right to judge of people like that. I wish I could only show you what Dove and I would like to do in taking you among us, and making you comfortable, until you should forget this sad blow."

"As for *her*," said Miss Brunel, with a smile, "I knew she was too gentle and good to despise any one, the moment I saw her. But she was so much sweeter and truer than ordinary women that I accounted for it on that ground; and I grew so fond of her in a few minutes. And you, too—what can I offer you for your goodness to me but my gratitude and my love?"

"My poor girl," said Mrs. Anerley, with a touch of moisture in the corner of her eyes, "I hope we may have some oppor-

tunity of proving to you what we think of you."

Mr. Anerley found that Will had explained to Miss Brunel the circumstances in which the family were now placed; so that he was relieved from the embarrassment of saying that whatever aid he might give her would not be pecuniary aid. But he had not much experience yet of the girl to whom he was speaking—of the quaint plainness and directness of her speech, the very antithesis of the style and manner which Mrs. Anerley had expected to meet.

Annie Brunel told him what small savings she possessed, and asked him if these could be made to cover all the expenses of the funeral, so that she might start on her new career unencumbered with debt. He thought it might be done, and he at once assumed the management of the sad details of the business before them.

"But then," she said, "I have the servant to pay; and I don't know what arrangement I may be able to make with the landlord of the house. Hitherto he has been very obliging."

"That, also, I will look after," said Mr. Anerley, "if you can put confidence in a man who has so successfully managed his own affairs as to bring his whole family into poverty."

"And I? Can I do nothing for you?" said Mrs. Anerley. "We who are all suffering from some kind of trouble should be glad to accept help from each other. Now, tell me—the clothes you may want—what have you done?"

"I had just begun to look over some things when you came in."

"Shall I stay and help you until dinner-time? Do let me."

And so, whilst Mr. Anerley went off to

see the landlord, Mrs. Anerley stayed behind and lent her assistance to that work in which the feminine heart, even when overshadowed by a funeral, finds consolation and delight. And she afterwards declared that she had never worked with a pleasanter companion than this patient, self-possessed and cheerful girl, whose queenly gestures, and rich voice, and dark clear face had so entranced and awed her when Juliet came upon the stage.

The two women became confidential with each other in the most natural and easy way. Mrs. Anerley entirely forgot the actress, and became wonderfully fond of and familiar with this quaint-mannered girl, with the splendid hair and the honest eyes.

"For my own part," she said to her, "I am not at all sorry that my husband has lost this money, if it were not likely to

affect Dove's comfort. You know he is such a very good man, and the very kindest and best husband a woman could wish to have; but I cannot tell you how it troubles me sometimes to think that he is not of the same religious opinions as the rest of us. That is the only thing; and I am sure it has been brought on by his being too well-off, and having nothing to do but read and speculate. He has never been put in a position requiring that aid and comfort we get from religious service; and it is only carelessness, I am convinced, has led him away."

"And now you think this misfortune——"

"Not the misfortune altogether, but the rougher fight he will have with the world. He will be glad to have that sense of peace and rest with which people sit together in church, and forget their every-day troubles.

If it will only do that for him—if it will only bring him back to us—I shall be glad that we have lost every penny we had in the world. It has been my trouble for years to think of his perilous state."

"He does not look like a man who would believe anything dangerous."

"I hope not, I hope not," said the tender wife; "I hope it is not dangerous. And yet I shall never feel that he is safe until he returns to the old faith and opinions he had when I first knew him. Even then, when a very young man, I was never sure of him. But he was always so respectful to every kind of religion, whether he believed in it or not, that I—yes, I—took him on trust."

"You do not seem to have regretted your choice," said Annie Brunel.

"No," she said, with a pleased and proud smile, "you wont find many people live

more comfortably than we. But there is that one thing, you see——"

"And your son—does he go with his father in these things?"

"I don't think so. I hope not. But both of them are such good men that I can't make up my mind to go and speak to them as if—as if they were sinners, you know."

A perplexed, humorous smile came over her face; and yet Annie saw that her friend was very much in earnest over this matter. It was the one bitter thing in this good woman's contented and peaceful lot.

After that interview Mrs. Anerley spent the better part of each day with her new protégée, and a wonderful love grew up between the two women, motherly and tender on the one side, trusting and childlike on the other. And for the first day or two Mr. Anerley paid far more attention to Annie Brunel's affairs than he did to his own,

until Mrs. Christmas was hidden away from a world that had perhaps not been over kind to her, and until the young girl was ready to go forth and seek her own existence. Will, during this time, never came near. He was trying to repair the beautiful world that he had shattered, and he kept faithfully to the task.

Finally, there came the question as to how Annie Brunel was to earn a living, and the *Times* was again called into requisition. Many a weary hour did Mrs. Anerley and her charge spend in reading through the advertisements, and writing letters in reply to those which seemed most suitable. No answer came to any one of these applications. For some reason or other they had not thought it worth while to reply to the advertisement about music, French, and private theatricals; but at last the pertinacity with which the lines appeared in the

newspaper drew discussion down upon them.

"If I were to be asked how I became proficient in theatricals, I should have to say I was on the stage; and I don't wish to do that."

"Why, dear?"

"Because the people might say they did not wish to have an actress in the house, and I want to avoid the insult."

"My dear, you have the absurdest notions. If they have seen you on the stage, they will be all the more delighted to have you. It was because you were an actress, I firmly believe, that I came to see you; and in a few days I have made a daughter of you."

"Nobody seems inclined to answer my letters," said the girl, ruefully.

"You may wait, and wait, for months," said Mrs. Anerley. "Add this one to the

number, and tell them who you are. But you must tell them that you only want a small salary, or they will never think of engaging you."

So the letter was written in accordance with these suggestions, and posted with several others. By that night's post—and the exceeding swiftness of the response might have provoked some suspicion in less unworldly minds—there came a letter. Annie Brunel was alone. She saw by the unknown handwriting that the letter was likely to be a reply to one of her applications; and for a minute or two she allowed the envelope to remain unopened, while she wondered what sort of destiny lay folded within it.

These were the words she read—

"Rose Villa, Haverstock Hill, October 29, 18—.

"Mrs. John Hubbard presents compliments to Miss Brunel; is exceedingly ob-

liged by the offer of her valuable assistance, and would Miss Brunel be good enough to call, at her convenience, any forenoon between ten and two? Mrs. Hubbard hopes that if Miss Brunel can be induced to accept the situation which lies at her disposal, nothing will be wanting to render her position in the house more that of a friend than an instructress. Mrs. Hubbard hopes her proposal, when properly explained to Miss Brunel, will meet with Miss Brunel's favourable consideration."

This to a governess! The girl scarcely knew how to regard the letter—so familiar, so respectful, so anxious.

"Here is another person who does not object to my being an actress. And I am to be her friend."

She came to the conclusion that a lady

who could so write to a perfect stranger, must either be mad, or have an idea that, in asking Annie Brunel to her house, it was Juliet or Rosalind who might be expected to come.

CHAPTER X.

THE NEW GOVERNESS.

IT was a cold, wet day, in the beginning of November, when Annie Brunel got out of the Hampstead 'bus, and found herself in the muddy highway of Haverstock Hill. A wet and cheerless day, with a damp and cutting wind, and a perpetual drizzling rain that made the black stems of the leafless trees glisten and drip; a day to make the people who passed each other in the street, vainly muffled-up against the wet and the keen cold, hate each other with a vague and gratuitous hatred. There was scarcely a traveller on foot who did not re-

gard all others in similar plight as somehow responsible for the contrariety of the elements.

"What a pity you should have come today!" cried Mrs. John Hubbard, as she came into the hall to receive her visitor. "I would rather you had broken a dozen appointments. I hope you are not wet. I hope you are not cold. Come into the drawing-room at once; there is a nice warm fire to bring the blood to your fingers again."

During this speech Annie Brunel had time to examine her future mistress. She was not obviously mad. Indeed, the coal-black hair, the rosy cheeks, the small and pretty mouth, the neat figure and small hands, were the natural ornaments of a person who seemed mentally far too colourless and contented ever to be troubled by intellectual derangement. Yet the new governess was

as much puzzled by her reception as by the letter she had received.

"There, now, take this easy-chair — let me draw it in for you—and we shall have a chat over the matter. I have hitherto only had a morning governess, you know; the poor girl took unwell some time ago, and she has not been here for some days now."

At this precise moment, Miss Betham was upstairs, packing her music and preparing for final departure. But to the good-natured and mentally limp Mrs. Hubbard, lying came as easily as telling the truth. She would not have told a lie to secure a peculiar end; but in the course of conversation she did not seem to recognise the necessity of being exact in her statements. She lied broadly and often; but she lied harmlessly—at least she meant to do no harm by her lying.

"I wont ask you any questions, Miss Brunel, not one. You have your own reasons for leaving the stage; and I'm not going to quarrel with what enables me to have your assistance, (if we can make arrangements, that is,) which I don't doubt for a moment."

"I am quite inexperienced, as I told you in my letter——"

"Oh, that does not signify," said the other, affably.

Annie Brunel looked up with a glance of astonishment, which any woman, not a fool, would have noticed.

"And if you think that I know enough to attempt to get into the way of teaching, I shall leave all the other arrangements to you. I am not anxious about the salary you may be inclined to give me; because, after all, it is only a trial. And if you think I am worth to you, in the meantime,

so much per week as will keep me in food and pay my lodgings——"

"Your lodgings! I could not think of submitting you to the misery of lodgings so long as I have a comfortable room to offer you."

Mrs. Hubbard did not look like a practical joker; but her reception of the new governess looked uncommonly like a practical joke.

"You are very kind," said Annie, the wide eyes being a little wider than usual; "but I thought it was as a day-governess——"

"To be sure, we have always had a day-governess. But in *your* case I should prefer a resident governess, especially if you are about to leave your home and take lodgings."

"I meant to take lodgings somewhere near you, if I had the good fortune to please you."

"In this neighbourhood you couldn't get lodgings; and if you go down to Camden Town, or over to Kentish Town—oh, my dear, I couldn't think of it. My husband is very particular about everybody connected with us being treated fairly—like one of ourselves, you understand; and as soon as he heard of your being inclined to answer the advertisement, he said—

"'I hope Miss Brunel will find a comfortable home here.'"

This was another lie—indeed what little intellect the poor woman had chiefly took the form of invention.

"I am not anxious to go into lodgings," said Annie Brunel, with a smile, "as I had a good deal of experience of them at one time."

"Shall we consider it settled then?"

"But you do not know whether I am fit for the duties you require."

"What an objection! I know you are."

"Then, as to terms——"

"We shan't quarrel about terms. Come and stay with us as soon as you can, and we'll make everything comfortable and agreeable for you, and we'll settle about terms afterwards. Then you know, we shall have private theatricals to amuse you."

In certain stories, and in not a few dramas, Annie Brunel had seen a perfect stranger suddenly determine to play the part of a special Providence towards the heroine; but she was lost in astonishment to meet that incomprehensible friend in real life. Here she was, however; and when it is manna that the clouds rain there is little reason in putting up an umbrella.

Mrs. Hubbard rang the bell, and sent a servant for the children. They came trooping down to the drawing-room, pushing

each other, and looking very shy and a trifle sulky.

"This is the lady who will help you with your lessons now, my dears, since Miss Betham has gone."

"Miss Betham hasn't gone. She is upstairs yet," said Master Alexander, "and she has just told Kate to fetch her her sherry."

"Ah, come to look after some music she has left behind, perhaps," said Mrs. Hubbard, with a significant nod to Annie.

"You will find the children very obedient," she continued, "and nothing shall be wanting to add to your comfort. May we conclude the bargain to be settled?"

"Certainly, so far as I am concerned," said the girl.

These were the agreeable tidings which awaited Mr. John Hubbard when he returned home that night.

"She is such a charming person," said his wife, "I don't wonder at your brother being fond of her."

"He is fond of her money," said John Hubbard, gloomily, "and fancies himself sure of it now."

"It would be very wicked to take advantage of the girl's innocence in any way," said Mrs. Hubbard, a proposition to which her husband assented.

"But if we can touch her *gratitude*, my dear," said he, "there is no saying, as I told you before, what might happen."

CHAPTER XI.

ANOTHER BLUNDER.

THE old year died out; the new one came in—not attended with any very bright auspices for the persons concerned in this story. John Hubbard was, perhaps, the only one of them who was pleased with present events, and hopeful for the future. During many a secret conclave with his good-natured, pretty, limp, and lying little wife, he speculated on what shape his governess's gratitude would ultimately assume.

Mr. Anerley had not succeeded in getting any employment. Several times he was

offered certain situations, and was on the point of accepting, when his son peremptorily forbade any such notion.

"If you can get proper employment, and proper remuneration," said Will, "well and good; if not, the pound or two you would get would not compensate for the trouble and ignominy of such a position."

Will's voice in the matter was powerful, for he was supporting the household with such exertions as he was yet permitted to make. The old man did not think of trouble or ignominy. He thought only of Dove, and the numerous little luxuries to which she was accustomed. Nor dared he speak of this, except to his wife; for both saw the perpetual endeavours that Will was making for all of them. Sometimes the old man distrusted the audacious cheerfulness with which Will insisted on his mother and Dove having this or that particular

luxury; and once he made a discovery that led him to think retrospectively of many things.

Down in St. Mary-Kirby, there was no home-entertainment which afforded Dove so much pleasure as having red mullet and champagne for supper; and the disgraceful little epicure picked so daintily her tiny morsel of fish, and sipped so quaintly, with coquettish eyes thrown at her father, her glass of wine, that to the other people the feast was much more æsthetic than sensuous.

"Mother," said Will, one evening, when he came home (but his words were directed to Dove), "we haven't had red mullet for supper for a long time. I've brought home some; and I've brought home a small case of champagne for the especial use of people who behave themselves."

"Oh, Will!" said the mother, "what extravagance!"

"The boy's mad!" said the father.

"Do you hear them, Dove? Now they have misconducted themselves, you and I shall have all the champagne to ourselves."

What a merry little party it was, that evening! The landlord of the house lent them the proper wineglasses; Dove went and put on part of the blue pearl head-dress the Count had given her, to make believe she had been at the theatre; and when they sate down at the bright white cloth, with everything on the table as brilliant and clean as fingers could make it, it was quite like old times.

"Now, Will," said Mr. Anerley, "let's see what you've brought. Mind you, my taste isn't dulled by want of exercise."

"I didn't consider your taste a bit, sir. I got the wine for Dove, and it is as sweet as——"

"Herself! These young people are too

bashful to pay compliments now-a-days. Ah, Dove, don't these bits of blue paper hold wonders within them—the treasures of the deep—the only fish worth calling a fish —and every one of them with a diamond ring in its mouth. Here, Will, give me your ring, that I may see how it looks on the nose of this famous fellow which I mean to give to Dove."

The young man darted a hasty, deprecating look towards his father, and the blood rushed over his face. The father caught that swift look, and glanced at the finger on which Will generally wore this ring—one he had brought from Turkey. There was no ring there; it *had* been there that morning.

Mr. Anerley did not enjoy the supper. Sometimes the fish seemed to stick in his throat; and the wine had a bitter flavour.

But he did not spoil the enjoyment of

the others; and Dove's delight at recalling one of the old, bygone evenings was immense. She persisted in making believe that they had been to the theatre; and criticized the actors gravely and severely. She pecked at her little piece of fish like a thrush at a ripe white cherry; and she wore on her pretty, small, blue-veined wrist a wonderful bracelet that Will had brought her from abroad.

"Shall I kiss the goblet for you, Sir Knight?" she said, taking a little sip out of Will's glass.

"And yours, venerable sir?"

"It seems to me," said Mr. Anerley, "that the old custom was a system of levying black mail on all the wineglasses round. Still, I will pay the price. * * Well, now, it isn't bad wine; but the bouquet is clearly owing to you, Dove."

"I didn't like the lover to-night," said

Dove, critically. "He seemed as if his clothes were quite new. I can't bear a lover coming with new clothes, and trying to make an effect. A lover should forget his tailor when he is in love. And I am against people being married in new clothes, with bridesmaids in new clothes, and everybody in new clothes, and everybody feeling cramped, and stiff, and embarrassed. When I marry, I shall have my husband wear the old, old suit in which I used to see him come home from his work! the clothes which I've got to love about as much as himself. I shan't have the tailor come between him and me."

"The heroine was rather pretty," hazarded Will, concerning the imaginary play.

"Well, yes. But she made love to us, and not to him. And I can't bear kissing on the stage—before such a lot of people—why don't they do all that before they come

on the stage, and then appear as engaged or married?"

"But you would have to employ a chorus to come and explain to the audience what was going on in the 'wings,'" said Will.

And so they chatted, and gossiped, and laughed, and it seemed as if they were again down in the old and happy Kentish valley.

When they had retired for the night, Mr. Anerley told his wife his suspicions about the ring.

"I was afraid he had done something like that," she said. "But who could regret it, seeing Dove so delighted? I hope he wont do it again, however. I should tell him of it but that I know he will be vexed if we mention it."

By common consent the case of champagne was relegated to the grand occasions of the future. The family was not in a

position to pay a wine merchant's bill; and so they remained contented with the knowledge that on any sudden prompting they had it in their power to become extravagant and luxurious.

Then Dove was better, so far as they could see; and they bore their little hardships with wonderful equanimity. She was better, doubtless; but she was very delicate; and the doctor had had a long and serious conversation with Mr. Anerley, in which he was advised to take Dove to spend the rest of the winter in Italy. Sirius was quite as possible a destination.

By this time Annie Brunel had become familiar with the Hubbard family, and had definitely entered upon her new duties. The longer she stayed in the house, the more she was puzzled by the consideration with which every one, except her pupils, treated her; and even they were impertinent not through

intention but by habit. Mrs. Hubbard was almost obtrusively affectionate towards her governess. Everything was done to make her residence in the house agreeable. She lunched and dined with Mrs. Hubbard, so that poor Miss Betham's sherry was never called into requisition. When there was a dinner-party or a dance in the house, Annie Brunel was invited as a guest, introduced to visitors as a guest, treated with all the courtesy due to a guest. She was never asked to sing by the Hubbards; although she played and sang enough at the solicitation of other people. The children were taught to consider her, not as a governess, but as a friend of their mamma's. When there were people at the house, they were obliged to treat her as a gracious and distinguished lady who had come to spend the evening, not as a poor governess expected to find correct accompaniments for people who gra-

tuitously changed the key three or four times in the course of a song.

As a governess, she ought to have been very grateful for such treatment. Yet she felt far from happy or contented. She did not like the pale, round-shouldered, nervous man who never looked one in the face. Despite the gratitude she could not but feel towards Mrs. Hubbard, she did not admire or love much that lady, whose unnecessary mendacity she had once or twice discovered. Here, however, was a home. Outside, the cold elements, the chiller hearts of strangers, the vicissitudes, trials, struggles, martyrdom of a fight for life; inside, warmth and comfort, apparently true friends, and easy duties. She tried to be grateful for all these things; and when moods of lonely despair and melancholy overwhelmed her, she upbraided her own weakness, and resolved to be more thankful in the future.

The Count had not ventured to go near her. He was satisfied to know that she was in safe keeping. He could bide his time. He had made one blunder; he would not again commit the mistake of forcing marital concerns upon her while she was moved by grief for the loss of an old friend. He allowed the slow passing days and weeks to work for him; trusting that in time he would only have to step in and reap the rich harvest his prudence had prepared.

But he called frequently at the office of his brother, to receive reports. And the tone of the Count, on one or two occasions, was sufficient to stir up a mild remonstrance from even that patient and much-enduring person.

"You talk to me as if you had paid me to engage her and keep her in the house for you."

"Did you engage her for yourself? You know I suggested the thing to you; and am

prepared to reimburse you for any extra expense you may have been put to."

"I declare," said the milder brother, "you talk as if you were fattening a pig, and I was watching the yard. You come and look over the palings, and gloat over your future satisfaction, and compliment me if the prospect is pleasing to you. Mind you, I don't think you have any supreme claim on the girl."

"Have *you?*"

"Certainly not."

"Well, what's the use of talking nonsense, Jack? If I marry her, it will be as good for you as for me."

"How?" said the lawyer, coldly, and with affected carelessness.

"Well," replied the Count, with some embarrassment, "there's the money, you see, coming into the family. That's a great matter."

"Yes, to *you*," said John Hubbard.

The Count looked at him for a moment; perhaps a thought struck him just then that, after all, his brother might be sincere in his view of the matter, and might testify his sincerity by carrying off the prize for himself.

"Gad, he can't do that very well," said the Count to himself, with a merry laugh, when he came to reflect on the conversation, "or what would Jane say? The girl is useless to him, so what's the use of his talking nonsense? Her money is safe from him, if safe from anybody."

But the more the Count thought over the affair, the less did he like the tone that his brother had lately assumed in talking of Annie Brunel. Further, he would have been as well pleased had he known that Miss Brunel was not *quite* so comfortable in his brother's house.

These things were the subject of much

conjecture and calculation on his part. They were also the theme of his after-dinner musings. Now, after-dinner dreams and resolves are very beautiful at times; but they should never be put down on paper. In an evil hour—it was one evening after he had dined, all by himself, in that great house down in Kent—he placed the following words in a letter to his brother:

"Balnacluith House, near St. Mary-Kirby,
"Jan. 17, 18—.

"DEAR JOHN,—

"Let me add a word to what I recently said about Miss Brunel. It is *your* interest to forward *my* interest, as you will discover. Now, I am afraid you are treating her with so much mistaken kindness that she will get to consider the position of governess pleasant. This is misleading her. She will only suffer for it afterwards. Nothing like wholesome severity at the time—

nothing. Hubert Anerley came to me and asked me to lend him some money and let him off a bargain about my brougham and a pair of horses. Did I? I knew it would only delude him with absurd hopes, and I said no; and so he accepted his fate, and I suppose has set about repairing a fortune lost by his own carelessness. That's *my* way, Jack; and you're too kind to the girl. Get Jane to try some wholesome severity—to teach her what a governess is—frighten her—threaten to turn her out without a character, or something of the sort. Anything, so she is made to understand how insecure her position is. You understand? Then I step in, and our family becomes one of the richest in England. What do you say to that? Do it at once—and firmly. It will be better to be done *decisively—very decisively—and soon.*

"Your affectionate brother,

"FRED. V. SCHÖNSTEIN."

Frederick von Schönstein should have seen his brother's face when that letter arrived. It was not an expressive face; but on this occasion there were several emotions clearly visible in it, and they were not of a mournful kind. Indeed, John Hubbard looked upon this letter as worth thousands of pounds to him. It was the key of the position. He showed it to his wife.

"What a brute!" she said, "to think of harming the poor girl. I have never liked your brother, my dear, since he began to try to entrap this girl, but now I am beginning to hate him."

And doubtless Mrs. Hubbard imagined, quite honestly, that it was merely compassion for her charming and unprotected governess which provoked her mild wrath and contempt.

"Fred's a fool, my dear, or he wouldn't have written that letter."

"Why?"

"Don't you see?" observed the husband, proud of his superior masculine perspicacity; "whenever he seeks to interfere with her or with our relations towards her, we have only to show her this letter, and I think that will considerably cook his goose."

It was not often that the meek and proper brother of the Count was tempted into slang; but on this great occasion, when a lucky chance had delivered everything into his hands, he could not forbear.

Count Schönstein never waited for that course of severity which was to render Annie Brunel an easy capture. His solitary life at Balnacluith House was becoming more and more unbearable; and so, at length, he resolved to precipitate matters.

One forenoon, when he knew his brother would be out, he went up to Haverstock Hill. His sister-in-law was a little frightened

by his appearance. She so far knew her own nature as to be aware that the Count had only to command and she would obey. *How* she wished that her husband were at home!

The Count was gracious, but firm. He begged her to grant him an interview with Miss Brunel, in tones which expressed his resolution to obtain the interview, whether his gentle sister-in-law agreed or not. For a moment a lie hovered on her lips; but probably she knew it would be of no avail; and so she only ventured on a remonstrance.

"If you do this now," said Mrs. John, "you will terrify her. She is not prepared. She does not know you are connected with us ——"

"I can explain all these matters," said the Count, peremptorily.

"Very well," said his sister-in-law, meekly.

In a minute afterwards, Annie Brunel entered the room. No sooner did she see who the visitor was, than a surprised, pleased light came into her eyes, and the heart of the Count leapt for joy. How beautiful she was to him then! The big bright eyes, the delicately rounded chin, the pretty mouth, the fine, southern languor, and grace, and softness of her face and figure—and the cold, cheerless, empty desolation of Balnacluith House!

She shook hands with him.

"How did you discover me here?"

"Don't you know?" he asked. "Don't you know that Mrs. Hubbard is my sister-in-law—that her husband is my brother—have they never spoken of me?"

In an instant the whole thing was laid bare to her. She understood now the extraordinary courtesy of her mistress; she understood now the references made by the

children to the deer that their uncle Frederick kept; and the advertisement—she saw that that was a trap. The discovery shocked her a little; but it also nerved her. She knew she had been deceived; she was yet unaware of any purpose that the deception could serve; but she confronted the Count with an intrepid spirit, and looked him in the face.

That look terrified him. "Have I," he thought, "made another blunder?"

The next moment found him entering on a long series of explanations, entreaties, and superfluous assertions. It had all been done honestly. They were afraid she would be homeless. They had advertised out of friendly intention—in perfect good faith. He had refrained from visiting the house, lest she should consider herself persecuted. The Hubbards had not mentioned his name, fearing that even that might frighten her.

For a minute or two these rapid revelations and confessions somewhat confused her. But out of the blundering representations of the Count arose certain facts strong and clear as the daylight.

"That advertisement *was* a trap?" she said, fixing her large, honest eyes upon him.

"But, you see——"

"And they have been treating me kindly, and deceiving me at the same time, that you might come——"

"Don't say that," said the Count, deprecatingly. "They deceived you with the best intentions towards yourself. And have I not the same intentions? Look at your position—a governess, dependent on other people for your bread, liable to be out of a situation and starving at any moment, bound down to certain duties every day, and living a solitary, monotonous life. Then

look at what you would be if you would only listen to me; you would have nothing to do but enjoy yourself from January to December—you would have everything at your command——"

"I think I have heard quite enough, Count Schönstein," she said, firmly. "And you would have spared both of us some pain if you had taken the answer I gave you before."

"And that is your only answer?"

"It is."

"How can you be so cruel?—so unreasonable? What do you mean to do?"

"I mean to leave this house."

"Why?" he said, struck with astonishment.

"*You* need not ask me why. You have been a good friend to me, and I do not wish to part from you in anger. You have been kind to me. I am sorry it is impossible for

me to ask you to see me again. I do not wish to see you again, or Mr. or Mrs. Hubbard, after what you have just told me."

She left the room, and the Count sate staring blindly before him, remotely conscious that something terrible had befallen him. The next thing he saw was Annie Brunel entering the drawing-room, followed by Mrs. John. The younger lady was dressed in black, and had now her bonnet and shawl on.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Hubbard. "You astonish me. Deceive you? Never such a thought entered my head. And as for that advertisement, it was no trap at all, but addressed to all governesses. Of course we knew that you *might* see it, and we were very glad when you did see it; but that we intentionally deceived you, I appeal to Count Schönstein, Miss Brunel."

"What I know of these matters, Mrs.

Hubbard, I have just learned from Count Schönstein," she said coldly. "I don't accuse any one. Perhaps you did nothing unusual. I don't know anything about the customs among ladies. I have been brought up amongst another kind of people. Good morning."

There was no resentment on the calm and beautiful face, nor the least touch of sarcasm in the low, soft voice. There was sadness, however—a resigned, patient sadness that smote the heart of both her auditors, and kept them silent there, while she went outside—into London, alone.

CHAPTER XII.

AN OLD ADMIRER.

NELLY FEATHERSTONE was busy that night. The small room in which she sate working was littered with all sorts of beautiful dressmaking materials; and Nelly herself was diligently engaged—sewing heavy golden fringe upon a resplendent Venetian doublet of green satin, which had glimmerings of white and crimson silk across the chest, and white satin sleeves, tightened and crisped with gold. Indeed, the sheen of satin and glitter of gold lay all over the dingy little room. These were the raw material of the new grand burlesque;

and Nelly, who made all her dresses herself, was famous for the historical accuracy of her costume. On this occasion, however, there was a green satin Glengarry lying on a chair, and green satin boots, with the heels not much bigger than a fourpenny-piece, on the table; and she wore on her fingers, to try their lustre, two large rings of cut glass, the one a shining emerald, the other a brilliant crimson.

When Annie Brunel tapped at the door and stepped in, Nelly threw all these things aside, and rushed to her old friend, and hugged and kissed her in her usual impulsive manner, with a dozen "my dears" to every sentence. Her friend's story was soon told; she wanted Nelly to help her to get some cheap lodgings in the neighbourhood.

"And so you know where to come first when you're down in your luck," said the girl, giving her another kiss, with the tears

coming into her eyes—for Nelly's well-worn heart had still a true and tender throb in it. "So sit you down and take everything off your mind—and share my room to-night, and to-morrow we'll see about business. Give me your bonnet, there now. Poor dear mother Christmas!—and I'll give you something to do until supper-time comes, and then we shall have a bit of cold mutton and bottled stout. Oh, I've had my trials, too, my dear, since I saw you."

"What's been the matter with you, Nelly? That young gentleman, I suppose——"

"Oh, yes, he's always at it. But thank goodness I've got rid of him at last."

"Quite sure?" said the other, with a smile.

"Oh, quite. Such a fearful row we had, my dear. First about lip-salve; he accused me of using that to make my lips red, when

I declare I haven't used it for two years. Very well, just as we had made that up, you know, dear, we were walking along Oxford-street, and there was a match-boy amusing himself, opposite a public-house, with a lot of other boys, and he was dancing a very, *very* clever breakdown step, and I said I'd give my ears if I could do that, just in fun, you know; and, lor, the passion he got into! Stormed about my low tastes, abused the British drama, said I had no more sentiment than a clown, and then I ordered him off, and walked home by myself."

"And which of you was the most miserable, Nelly?"

"I miserable? Not I. That very night Mr. Helstone sent me the most beautiful little speech about politics and other stuff, and Mr. Melton says I may use it in my part."

"You'll break that young gentleman's heart, Nelly. Indeed, it is a shame——"

"Nonsense! But I'll have my revenge upon him this time for his quarrelling with me. You see this is a boy's dress. I've made the skirt of it two inches shorter than I should have done. There. And I shall be in tights; and dance a breakdown; and sing a music-hall song; and when the lime-light comes on at the end, *I'll stare into it as hard as ever I can.*"

"But why should you injure your eyes?"

"To provoke him. He will be there. And he hates to see me in a boy's dress; and he hates to see me dance——"

"But *I* thought you were never to see him again."

"Neither I shall. Never."

Miss Featherstone's landlady tapped at the door, and entered with a letter.

"Please, miss, he says he's sorry to trouble you, but is there an answer?"

Nelly hurriedly ran over the letter, and there was a wicked smile of triumph on her face.

"It's *him*," she said to her companion. "Would you like to see him? Shall I ask him to come up, since you are here?"

"By all means."

"Mrs. Goddridge, tell him I have a friend with me, and he may come up, if he likes."

Blushing, embarrassed, delighted, shame-faced, and yet radiant with joy, Mr. Frank Glyn was introduced to Annie Brunel. He was a good-looking, slightly built young fellow, with a sensitive cast of face, pleasant, large, blue eyes, and a certain tenderness about the lines of the mouth which boded ill for his future reminiscences of his acquaintance with Miss Nelly Featherstone.

That young person should have been flirted with by a man of stronger mettle than Frank Glyn.

"I hope I am not disturbing you," he said nervously, looking at the table.

"I hope you are in a better temper than when I last saw you," said she.

"We may let bygones be bygones now, Nelly. It wouldn't do to fight before Miss Brunel. She might have a strange impression of us."

"I think you are two foolish children," said Annie Brunel, "who don't spend a peaceable life when you might."

"I say so, too," said Nelly. "Life is not so long, as I have told him, that we can afford to throw it away in quarrels. And yet he *will* quarrel. Confess that you always do quarrel, Frank. There's only one person in the world who is always good to me; and I do so love him! When the

dear old gentleman who made me these boots brought them home, and when I looked at them, I could have thrown my arms round his neck."

"I dare say you could, without looking at the boots," said her lover, with a fierce and terrible sneer.

"I suppose it's a weakness," said Nelly, with philosophic equanimity, "but I confess that I love a pair of beautiful, little, bright, neat, soft, close-fitting boots better than any man I ever saw."

She caught up that charming little pair of gleaming boots, and pressed them to her bosom, and folded her hands over them, and then took them and kissed them affectionately before placing them again on the table.

An awful thunder-cloud dwelt on poor Frank's brow.

"I shall take them to bed with me," said

the young lady, with loving eyes still on the small heels and the green satin, "and I'll put them underneath my pillow, and dream of them all the night through."

Mr. Glyn got up. There was a terrible look in his eyes, and a terrible, cold harshness in his voice, as he said—

"I am interrupting your work and your conversation, ladies. Good-night, Miss Brunel; good-bye, *Miss Featherstone.*"

With which he shook hands and departed —to spend the rest of the evening in walking recklessly along dark suburban roads, wondering whether a few drops of prussic acid would not be his gentlest and truest friend.

First love had been awakened in Frank Glyn's heart by the unlucky instrumentality of Miss Featherstone. Delighted with this new and beautiful idealism, he was eager to repay her with an extravagant gratitude for

what, after all, was only his own gift to himself. Nelly knew nothing of this occult psychical problem; but was aware of the extravagant gratitude; and conducted herself towards it and him with such results as do not concern this present history.

"You are very hard upon the poor boy," said Annie Brunel.

Nelly pouted prettily, as if she had been ten years younger than she was, and said he had no business to be so quick-tempered. But, after supper, when they were retiring for the night, and she had grown confidential, she confessed she was very fond of him and hoped he would come again and "make it up."

"I can't help quarrelling with him, and he can't help quarrelling with me; and so we'll go on, and on, and on——"

"Until you marry."

"No, until I marry somebody else, for

the sake of peace and quiet. And yet I declare if he were to come boldly up to-morrow and insist on my marrying him, I'd do it at once. But he is always too sensitive, and respectful, and I can't help teasing him. Why doesn't he *make* me do what he wants. He's a man, and I'm a woman, and yet I never feel as if he were stronger than I was—as if I ought to look to him for strength, and advice, and what not. He's too much of a girl in his delicate frightened ways."

Next morning Nelly got a messenger and sent him up to Mr. John Hubbard's for Annie Brunel's boxes, which had been left packed up. Then they two went out to inspect some lodgings which had been recommended to them by Miss Featherstone's landlady. The house was a dingy building in Howland Street, Tottenham-court Road; but the rent of the two rooms was small, and

Miss Brunel engaged them. She had very little money now in her purse. Mrs. Hubbard and she had been on so peculiar terms that both refrained from talking about salary; and when the boxes were brought down to Nelly's place by the messenger, no communication of any kind accompanied them.

"If they want to see me, Nelly," said Annie Brunel, "they will send to your house, thinking that my address. But I don't want my address to be given them, mind, on any consideration."

"But how are you to live, my dear?"

"I must find out, like other people," she said, with a smile.

"Wont your Anerley friends help you?"

"What help could I take from them? Besides, they are worse off than myself, and that pretty girl of theirs, about whom I have so often spoken to you, is very poorly and wants to be taken out of London. I

should rather like to help them than think of their helping me."

"Wont you come back to the stage, then?"

"Not until I am starving."

The rehearsals for the new burlesque began, and a farce was put on in which Nelly played; so that, for several days, she was so busy from morning till night that she never had time to run up to see her friend in these poor Howland Street lodgings. So Annie Brunel was left alone. The Anerleys had not her address. The Hubbards she was only too anxious to avoid. Mrs. Christmas, her old companion, was gone; and around her were thousands of her fellow-creatures all struggling to get that bit of bread and that glass of water which were necessary to her existence.

The landlady and her husband treated her with great respect, because, when asked

for a month's rent in advance, she at once gave them the two sovereigns demanded. There remained to her, in available money, about twenty-four shillings, which is not a great sum wherewith to support a person looking out for a situation in London.

In about a week's time Nelly Featherstone called. After the usual osculation and my dearing, Nelly assumed a serious air, and said that it wouldn't do.

"You're looking remarkably ill, and you'll be worse if you sit moping here, and doing nothing. You must be a descendant of Don Quixote. Why not come down to the theatre, see Mr. Melton, and get an engagement?"

"I can't do it, Nelly."

"You mean you wont. Then, at all events, you'll spend to-day as a holiday. The rehearsals are all over. I shall send

for Frank, and he will take us into the country."

"For shame! To drive that poor fellow mad, and then call him back whenever you want a service from him."

"It will give him far more delight than it will us."

"No, Nelly; I have no heart to go anywhere. If you have promised to meet your Frank, as I imagine, you ought to go off by yourself at once."

"I'm not going to do anything of the kind. Tell me what you mean to do if you remain in the house."

"See if there are any more letters I can write, and watch the postman as he comes round from Tottenham-court Road."

"Then you can't go on doing that for ever. Put on your bonnet, and let us have a walk down Regent-street, and then come and have dinner with me, and spend the

afternoon with me, until I go to the theatre."

This she was ultimately persuaded to do. Nelly did her utmost to keep her friend in good spirits; and altogether the day was passed pleasantly enough.

But the reaction came when Nelly had to go down to the theatre alone.

"You look so very wretched and miserable," said she, to Annie. "I can't bear the idea of your going home to that dull room. And what nonsense it is not to have a fire because you can't afford it. Come you down to the theatre; Mr. Melton will give you a stage-box all to yourself; then you'll go home with me to-night, and stay with me."

She would not do that. She went home to the cold, dark room—she lit only one candle for economy's sake—and she asked if there were any letters. There were none.

She had only a few shillings left now. She abhorred the idea of getting into debt with her landlady; but that, or starvation, lay clearly before her. And as she sate and pondered over her future, she wondered whether her mother had ever been in the like straits, whether she, too, had ever been alone, with scarcely a friend in the world. She thought of the Count, too.

"If the beggar would marry the king, and exchange her rags for silk attire," she said to herself, bitterly, "now would be the time."

By the nine o'clock post no letter came; but a few minutes after the postman had passed, the landlord came up to the door of her room.

"A letter, please, miss, left by a boy."

Hoping against hope, she opened it as soon as the man had left. Something tumbled out and fell on the floor. On the page

before her she saw inscribed, in a large, coarse, masculine handwriting, these words—

"*An old admirer begs the liberty to send the enclosed to Miss Brunel, with love and affection.*"

But in that assumed handwriting Nelly Featherstone's *e*'s and *r*'s were plainly legible. The recipient of the letter picked up the folded paper that had fallen. It was a five-pound note.

"Poor Nelly!" she said, with a sort of nervous smile, and then her head fell on her hands, which were on the table, and she burst into tears over the scrawled bit of paper.

CHAPTER XIII.

POSSESSION.

MR. JOSEPH CAYLEY, Junr., sate in his private room in the office of Cayley and Hubbard. He was an unusually tall man, with a thin, cold, hard face, black eyes, black hair, and an expression of extraordinary solemnity. He looked as if none of his ancestors had ever laughed. A shrewd and clear-headed man of business, he was remarkable at once for his upright conduct of professional affairs and for the uncompromising frankness, with the extreme courtesy, of his personal demeanour. His friends used to wonder how such a man and

John Hubbard ever pulled together; but they did, and their business was even better now than when old Mr. Cayley took John Hubbard into partnership.

A card was handed to Mr. Cayley by one of the youths in the office. He glanced at the card, looked at it attentively, and then there came over his face a singular expression of concern, surprise, and almost fear.

"Show her in," he said, sharply, to the lad.

He rose and paced up and down the room for a moment; then he found himself bowing into a chair a lady completely dressed in black, who had just entered.

"Will you permit me," he said, fixing his big black eyes upon her, "to ask my partner to join us? I anticipate the object of your visit—and—and——"

"Does your partner live at Haverstock Hill?"

"Yes."

"I would rather speak with you alone, then," said the young lady, calmly. "I have here a letter from my mother, Mrs. Brunel, to you. I need not explain to you why the letter has not been delivered for years. I was not to deliver it until necessity——"

"You need not explain," said Mr. Cayley, hurriedly taking the letter. "This is addressed to my father; but I may open it. I know its contents; I know everything you wish to know, Miss Brunel."

When he had opened the letter, he read it, and handed it to Annie Brunel, who read these words—

"*Mr. Cayley,*

"*My daughter claims her rights.*

"*Annie Marchioness of Knottingley.*"

She looked at him, vaguely, wonderingly, and then at the faded, brown writing again.

The words seemed to disappear in a mist; then there was a soft sound in her ears, as of her mother's voice ; and then a sort of languor stole over her, and it seemed to her that she was falling asleep.

"Take this glass of wine," was the next thing she heard. "You have been surprised, alarmed, perhaps. But you know the handwriting to be your mother's?"

"Yes," was the reply, in a low voice.

"And you understand now why you were to call upon us."

"I don't know—I don't understand—my mother ought to be here now," said the girl, in hurried, despairing accents. "If that letter means anything, if my mother was a rich lady, why did she keep always to the stage? Why conceal it from me? And my father? Where was he that he allowed her to travel about and work day after day and night after night?"

"He was dead."

Many and many a time had Joseph Cayley rehearsed this scene upon which he had now entered. His earliest initiation into the secrets of the office was connected with it. It had been a legacy to him from his father; and the unusual mystery and importance of the case had so impressed him that he used to imagine all the circumstances of the young girl's coming to claim her own, and of his speeches and bearing during the interview. He forgot all his elaborate speeches, and remembering only the bare facts of the case, related them with as great delicacy as he could. Now for the first time did Annie Brunel understand the sad circumstances of her mother's story, and for the moment she lost sight of everything else. She was away back in that strange and mournful past, recalling her mother's patient bearing, her heroic labour,

her more than heroic cheerfulness and self-denial, and the bitter loneliness of her last hours.

"It was his friends who kept him from her?" she asked, not daring to look up.

The lawyer knew better; but he dared not tell the cruel truth to the girl.

"Doubtless," he said. "Your father's friends were very proud, and very much against his marrying an actress."

"And my mother feared my going among them?"

"Doubtless. But you need not do so now."

"Do they know who I am?"

"Yes, *my lady*."

He uttered the words, not out of compliment, but of set purpose. It was part of the information he had to give her. She looked up to him with a curious look, as if he were some magician who had suddenly

given her sacksful of gold, and was about to change the gold again into flints.

"If all this is true, why did I never hear it from any one else?"

"We alone knew, and your father's friends. *They* concealed the marriage as well as they could, and certainly never would speak to any one about you."

"And all these estates you speak of are mine?" she said, with a bewildered look on her face.

"Yes."

"And all that money?"

"Certainly."

"Without the chance of anybody coming forward and saying it is not mine?"

"There is no such chance that I know of, once you have been identified as Lady Knottingley's daughter, and that will not be difficult."

"And I can do with the money what I

like?" she asked, the bewilderment turning to a look of joy.

"Most undoubtedly."

"Out of such sums as you mention, I could give 20,000*l.* to one person, and the same amount to another?"

"Certainly. But you will forgive my saying that such bequests are not usual —perhaps you will get the advice of a friend."

"I have only two friends—a Miss Featherstone, and an old gentleman called Mr. Anerley. These are the two I mean."

Mr. Cayley opened his eyes with astonishment.

"Miss Featherstone of the ——— Theatre?"

"Yes."

"You propose to give her 20,000*l.*?"

"Yes," said the young girl, frankly, and with a bright, happy look on her face.

"The imprudence—the indiscretion—if I may say so!—(although it is no business of mine, my lady, and we shall be glad to fulfil any of your instructions). What could such a girl do with that sum of money?"

"What shall I do with all the rest—if it is real, which I can scarcely believe yet? But I wish you to tell me truly what was my mother's intention in keeping this secret from me. I was only to apply to you in extreme need. No one knows how extreme my need is—how extreme it was last night when it drove me to take out that letter and resolve to appeal to you."

"Your mother told my father why she should keep the secret from you. She wished you never to undergo the wrongs she had suffered by coming in contact with those people whose influence over your father she feared and hated."

"And how she used to teach me always

to rely upon the stage!" she said, musingly, and scarcely addressing herself to the man before her. "Perhaps I have done very wrong in relinquishing it. Perhaps I am to have as miserable a life as she had; but it will not be through *them*."

"No, my lady, there is no necessity why you should ever see one of the family."

"And it *was* her wish that I should come to you when I was in extreme distress——"

"Distress! I hope not pecuniary——"

"That, and nothing else," said the girl, calmly.

Mr. Cayley was only too glad to become her banker, until the legal arrangements should permit of her stepping into a command of money such as Harry Ormond himself had never owned.

"And in the meantime," she added, "you will not mention to any one my having seen you. I do not know what I

shall do yet. I fear there is something wrong about it all—something unreal or dangerous; and when I think of my poor mother's life, I do not wish to do anything in haste. I cannot believe that all this money is mine. And the title, too—I should feel as if I were on the stage again, and were assuming a part that I should have to drop in an hour. I don't want all that money; I should be afraid of it. If my mother were only here to tell me!"

Mr. Cayley was called away at this moment to see some other visitor. In his absence John Hubbard came to the door of the room and looked in.

He saw before him a figure which he instantly recognised. The girl was looking at the sheet of brown paper which bore her mother's name, her eyes were wet, and her hands were clasped together, as if in mute supplication to that scrap of writing to say

something more and guide her in this great emergency. John Hubbard guessed the whole situation of affairs directly. Without a moment's hesitation, he entered, and Annie Brunel looked up.

"My poor girl," he said, in accents of deep compassion, with his pale face twitching nervously, "I understand your sad position; and if you had only remained in our house a few days longer, our counsel and advice might have been of service to you in this crisis. How deeply you must feel the want of a true and faithful adviser——"

John Hubbard became aware that he had made a mistake. All the return that his sympathetic consolation provoked was a calm and penetrating look: and then, with a sudden change of manner, that surprised and half frightened him, she rose to her feet, and said, coldly and proudly—

"I am here on business; it is Mr. Cayley I wish to see."

Bewildered alike by her manner and her speech, Mr. Hubbard only blundered the worse.

"My lady," he said, hurriedly, and with profound respect, "you will forgive me if I have been too forgetful in offering you my sympathy. But as an old friend—our old relations—the pleasant evenings——"

"Mr. Hubbard," she said, in the same tone (and before the clear, cold, cruel notes of her voice the walls of his imaginative Jericho fell down and crumbled into dust) "I am much obliged to you and your wife for having employed me. I hope I did my work in return for the food I received. As to your kindness, and the pleasant evenings spent in your house, I have an impression which I need not put into words. You know I had a conversation with your brother

before I left your house which seemed to explain your kindness to me. At the same time, I am as grateful to you as I can be."

"That brother of mine again!" thought John Hubbard, with an inward groan.

Mr. Cayley came into the room, and was surprised to find his partner there.

"I wish to speak to you in private, sir," said Miss Brunel to Mr. Cayley; and thus dismissed, John Hubbard retired, thinking of the poor children who had been deprived of handsome little presents all through the blundering folly of their uncle.

"Hang him!" said John Hubbard, "the best thing the fool can do is to shoot himself and leave his money to the boys. As for *her*, he has set her dead against me for ever. And now she will be Lady Annie Knottingley, and my wife might have been her best friend, and we might have lived,

almost, at that splendid place in Berks—and the children——"

There was no more miserable creature in London that day than the Count's brother; and he considered himself an injured, ill-used, and virtuous man.

The appearance of John Hubbard had done this one good thing—it had determined Annie Brunel to make up her mind. It recalled so forcibly the loneliness and misery, the humiliation and wretchedness of these past months, that she instantly resolved never, if she could help it, to come into contact with such people again. With this wealth at her command, she was free. She could choose such friends, and scenes, and pursuits as she liked best; she could—and here the warm heart of her leapt up with joy—she could reach out her hand to those friends who might be in want—she could be their secret protector, and glide in like an invisi-

ble fairy to scare away the wolf from their door by the sunshine of her gilded and luminous presence. This splendid potentiality she hugged to her heart with a great joy; and as she went away from Mr. Cayley's office (after a long interview, in which he explained to her the legal aspects and requirements of the situation) there was a fine, happy light on her face. She no longer doubted that it was all real. She already felt the tingling of a full hand; and her brain was busy with pictures of all the people to whom that hand was to be freely extended. In many a romance had she played; but never a romance like this, in which all the world but herself was ignorant of the secret. She would go about, like an emperor with a bundle of pardons in his pocket, like a kindly spirit who would transform the coals in poor men's grates into lumps of gleaming rubies, and diamonds,

and emeralds. She would conceal her mysterious power; and lo! the invisible will would go forth, and this or that unhappy man or woman—ready to sink in despair before the crushing powers of circumstance—would suddenly receive her kindly help, and find himself or herself enriched and made comfortable by an unknown agency.

Like every one who has suffered the trials of poverty, she fancied that nearly all the ills of life were attributable to want of money, and she saw in this wealth which had become hers a magnificent instrument of amelioration. She had a very confused notion of Mr. Cayley's figures. She knew the value of five pounds or twenty, or even a hundred; but when it came to thousands comprehension failed her. She could not tell the difference between a hundred and fifty thousand pounds and the same sum per annum; both quantities were not reducible

to the imagination, and consequently conveyed no distinct impression. She knew vaguely that the money at her command was inexhaustible; she could give each of her friends—certainly she had not many—a fortune without affecting (sensibly to herself) this accumulation of banker's ciphers.

So she walked westward through the crowded city, weaving dreams. Habit had so taught her to dread the expense of a cab that she never thought of employing a conveyance, although she had in her pocket fifty pounds which Mr. Cayley had pressed upon her. She was unaware of the people, the noise, the cold January wind, and the dust. Her heart was sick with the delight of these vague imaginings, and the inexpressible joy of her anticipations was proof against those physical inconveniences which, indeed, she never perceived.

Yet her joy was troubled. For among all the figures that her heart loved to dwell upon,—all the persons whom she pictured as receiving her munificent and secret kindness—there was one with whom she knew not how to deal. What should she give to Will Anerley? The whole love of her heart he already possessed; could she, even though he were to know nothing of the donor, offer him money? She shrank from such a suggestion with apprehensive dislike and repugnance; but yet, her love for him seemed to ask for something, and that something was not money.

"What can I do better than make him marry Dove, and forget me?" she said to herself, and she was aware of a pang at her heart which all Harry Ormond's money, and twenty times that, could not have removed.

For a little while the light died away from her face; but by-and-by the old cheerful

resolute spirit returned, and she continued her brisk walk through the grey and busy streets.

"Mr. Cayley," she said to herself, talking over her projects as a child prattles to its new toys, "fancies Mr. Anerley had thirty or forty thousand pounds. If I send him that, they will all go down to Kent again, and Dove will win her lover back to her with the old associations. They might well marry then, if Will were not as fiercely independent as if he were a Spanish Duke. I could not send *him* money; if he were to discover it, I should die of shame. But it might be sent to him indirectly as a professional engagement; and then — then they would marry, I know—and perhaps they might even ask me to the wedding. And I should like to go, to see Dove dressed as a bride, and the look on her face!"

Dove did not know at that moment what

beautiful and generous spirit was scheming with a woman's wit to secure her welfare—what tender projects were blossoming up, like the white flowers of charity and love, in the midst of the dull and selfish London streets. But when Annie Brunel, having walked still further westward, entered the house which the Anerleys occupied, and when she came into the room, Dove thought she had never seen the beautiful dark face look so like the face of an angel.

CHAPTER XIV.

ORMOND PLACE.

A STILL, cold, beautiful morning in March,—the dark crimson sun slowly creeping up behind the tall and leafless trees of the wood on this Berkshire hill. There is snow everywhere,—snow on the far uplands, snow on this sloping forest, snow on the shelving ground that glides down to the banks of the smooth blue waters of the Thames. There is a ruddy glow over that wintry waste of white; for the eastern vapours deaden the light of the sun, and redden it, and steep the far horizon in a soft purple haze. There is not a breath of wind.

The sere and withered stems of the tall grey rushes by the river-side are motionless except when the wild duck stir in their marshy secrecy, or the water-hens swim out to take a cautious look up and down the stream. Here and there too the river catches a streak of crimson and purple as it lies hushed and still in the hushed, still, white meadows.

Back from these meadows lies the long low hill which slopes downward to the east, and loses itself in illimitable woods. Up here on its summit is the little village of Steyne—only a church, with a square grey tower, a vicarage smothered in dark ivy, and two or three cottages. Further along the great bank you come to the woods of Ormond Place; and right in the centre of them, in a great clearance visible for miles round, stands, fronting the river and the broad valley and the far landscape, the house in

which Harry Ormond, Marquis of Knottingley, died.

It is a modern house, large, roomy, and stately, with oval-roofed greenhouses breaking the sharp descent of the walls to the ground; a house so tall and well-placed as to overlook the great elms in the park which, on the other side of the broad and banked-up lawn, slopes down into the valley. As the red sun rises over the purple fog it catches the pale front of the house, and sheds over it a glimmer of gold. The snow gleams cold and yellow on the evergreens, on the iron railings of the park, on the lawn where it is crossed and recrossed with a network of rabbits' footprints. Finally, as the sun masters the eastern vapours, and strikes with a wintry radiance on the crimson curtains inside the large windows (and they have on this morning a warmer light flickering upon them

from within), Ormond Place, all white and gold, shines like a palace of dreams, raised high and clear over that spacious English landscape that lies cold and beautiful along the noblest of English rivers.

There was life and stir in Ormond Place this morning. The carriage-drive had been swept; the principal rooms in the house stripped of their chintz coverings; great fires lit; the children of the lodge dressed in their smartest pinafores; the servants in new liveries; harness, horses, carriages, and stables alike polished to the last degree. The big fires shone in the grates, and threw lengthening splashes of soft crimson on the thick carpets and up the palely decorated walls. The sleeping palace had awoke, and the new rush of life tingled in its veins.

About twelve o'clock in the forenoon the carriage that had been sent to Corchester station returned with two occupants inside.

The children at the lodge, drawn up in line, bobbed a curtsey as they stared wonderingly at the carriage window, where they saw nothing. A few minutes afterwards Annie Brunel, pale a little, and dressed entirely and simply in black, walked into her father's house between the servants, who were unconsciously trying to learn their future fate in the expression of her face. And if they did not read in that face a calm forbearance, a certain sad sympathy and patience, they had less penetration than servants generally have.

She entered one of the rooms—a great place with panelled pillars in the centre, and a vague vision of crystal and green leaves at the further end—and sat down in one of the chairs near the blazing fire. It was not a moment of triumph—it was a moment of profound, unutterable sadness. The greatness of the place, the

strange faces around her, increased the weight of loneliness she felt. And then all the reminiscences of her mother's life were present to her, and she seemed to have established a new and strange link between herself and her. It seemed as if the great chasm of time and circumstance had been bridged over, and that in discovering her mother's house and the old associations of these bygone years, she should have discovered her also, and met the kindly face she once knew. If Annie Napier had walked into the room just then and laid her hand on her daughter's shoulder, I do not think the girl would have been surprised.

"Was my mother ever in this house?" she asked of Mr. Cayley, not noticing that he was still standing with his hat in his hand.

"Doubtless. She was married in that little church we passed."

"And instead of spending her life here in comfort and quiet, he let her go away to America, and work hard and bitterly for herself and me."

Mr. Cayley said nothing.

"Do you know anything of her life here? How long she stayed? What were her favourite rooms? Where she used to sit?"

"No, your ladyship; I only presume Lady Knottingley must have lived here for a little while before going to Switzerland. My father might be able to tell me."

"I am very anxious to see him,—he is the only person I am anxious to see. He knew my mother; perhaps he can tell me something about her life here and in Switzerland. She *may* have left some things in the house—a book or a picture—that he might tell me was hers,—don't you think so?"

Mr. Cayley, against his knowledge, was

forced to admit that it *was* possible, for he saw there were tears in the girl's eyes.

"Would you care to go through the house now?" he suggested. "Mrs. Tillotson will go with you, and see what arrangements or alterations you want made. And about your future residence here——"

"I cannot stay here," she said; "the place is too big and too lonely. I could not bear to live alone in this great place."

"Your ladyship need not want for society. Both of the trustees, Lord Sefton and——"

"I will not see one of them!" she said, with flashing eyes. "I consented to see them, when you said it was necessary—but to meet them as friends! They knew my mother; they must have seen her and known her; and they never tried to help her. They were men; and they let a woman be treated like that!"

The bitter scorn of the words sounded so strangely as it came from the gentle face; but there was an indignant flush in her cheeks, and indignation in her eyes.

"My mother spent years of weary labour that she might never go amongst these people. With all her love for me, she thought it better that I, too, should work for my living, and run the chances of illness, rather than go amongst them; and am I to make friends with them now? Their condescension is great; but when a woman has lived the life that I have, she begins to mistrust people who want to be friends with you only when you become fortunate. And why do they want to be friends with me? They will take me into society? I don't wish to go. They will offer me their wives and sisters as companions? I prefer other companions. I would rather walk out of this house a beggar to-morrow morning than

pretend to be friends with people *whom I hate.*"

"Your ladyship is unjust," said Mr. Cayley. "These gentlemen tried to induce your mother to return to England and accept that effort at compensation which Lord Knottingley made when it was too late. Nor could they show any interest in your welfare before now without revealing that secret which your mother had imposed on us all. As well blame me for not seeking you out before you came to our office. We all of us knew who you were; we were bound to let you make the first overtures yourself."

"Compensation? You imagine that a woman who had her heart broken should have accepted that tardy acknowledgment of her rights as a sufficient compensation?"

"It was all Lord Knottingley could then offer," said the lawyer, who stuck manfully

to the clear outlines of the case as they lay mapped out in his brain, without regard to the distortion produced by the generous impulses of love, and pity, and indignation. These disturbant influences, in the present case, he could not well understand; for he failed to comprehend the powerful caste-hatred which the girl had sucked in with her mother's milk—a bitter and illogical prejudice, which neither the tenderness of her own nature, nor the provoked arguments of Will, nor the wise counsel and example of Mr. Anerley had in any way tempered.

Shortly afterwards, they went on a tour of inspection through the house, accompanied by Mrs. Tillotson, a tall, thin-faced, dark woman, with placid, melancholy eyes, and a soft voice. The first question asked of the housekeeper by her new mistress was whether she remembered Lord Knottingley's wife. But neither Mrs. Tillotson, nor any

one of the servants, had been with Lord Knottingley at that time.

"Except Brooks, my lady, perhaps. He has been with the family since he was a boy."

"Who is Brooks?"

"The lodge-keeper. Perhaps your ladyship didn't see him at the gate, for he is old and seldom moves out of doors. But surely on such a day as this——"

"I saw some children——"

"They are his grandchildren — John Brooks' children. They all live in the lodge. But he is sure to present himself during the day; and I hope your ladyship wont be offended by his—his manner—his bluntness of speaking——"

When they had gone through the house, and the young girl had indicated what rooms she should occupy, they returned downstairs. There was an old man in the hall, his cap

in his hand, his long white hair falling on the neck of his fine Sunday coat, which was considerably too small for him. He regarded Annie Brunel with a curious look, and said to her as she approached—

"Pardon, my lady, I thought I'd come up and see as it were all true. And true it is—true it is."

"That is Brooks," said Mrs. Tillotson.

The girl bade the old man go into the great drawing-room.

"You don't remember me," he said. "I remember you; but as you came down them stairs, I'd 'a sworn it wasn't you. If they hadn't told me you were coming, I should ha' said it was a ghost—the ghost o' your mother as come down them stairs."

"You remember her?" she said, with an eager, bright look.

"Ay, and you too. You don't remember me; but I nearly killed you once—when your

pony tried to take the upper 'and on ye, and I 'it 'im, and afoor I knew where I was——"

"But where did all this happen?"

"Why, in Switzerland, where you and your mother was. I've good eyes; I can remember. And there's lots more o' the old folk as might, only they've turned 'em all off, and brought in new uns, as doesn't know nothin' o' the family, or the Place. It was your father as said I should live here till I died, and then they can turn me out, if they like; and I came up to see if it was true you had come home, and whether you'd want me to go with the rest. If you mean it, say it, plump and plain. I'm not afeard to go; I can earn my living as well as younger men I knows on about this 'ere very place——"

"My good man, don't disquiet yourself. You will never have to leave your house through me. But I want you to tell me all

you know about my mother—everything. Wont you sit down? And you will have some wine."

Mr. Cayley rang for some wine; and Annie Brunel herself poured some into a glass and gave it to the old man.

"I like the wine—and it's not the first time by forty year as I've tasted his lordship's wine—but I can't abide them big, blazing fires as melts a man's marrow."

"Come outside, then," said the girl; "the day is pleasant enough out of doors."

"Ah, that's better," he said, and his keen, fresh face brightened up as he stepped outside into the brisk cold air, with the brilliant sunshine lying on the crisp snow.

The two of them walked up and down the long carriage-drive, between the tall rows of bleak trees; and as the old man garrulously gossiped about the past times and his more or less confused memories, it

seemed to Annie Brunel as though the whole scene around her were unreal. The narrowing avenue of trees, the heaped-up snow, the broad shafts of sunlight falling across the path, the glimpses of the white meadows, and the blue stream, and the wintry sunshine hitting on the vane of the village church, were all so very like a theatrical "set;" while the man beside her, whom she had never seen before, seemed to be some strange link connecting her with a forgotten and inscrutable past. The assurance that he would not be "turned off to follow the rest" had softened old Brooks' usually querulous and pugnacious manner; and in his most genial fashion he recalled and recounted whatever stories he could remember of Annie Brunel's old childhood, and of her mother's happy life on the margin of that Swiss lake.

He actually gossiped his companion into cheerfulness. Forgetting all about Mr.

Cayley, she went with Brooks down to the lodge; and there the old man, intensely proud of the familiarity he had already established between himself and her, presented to her, with calm airs of superiority, his overawed son and daughter-in-law. And the new mistress made herself quite at home; and had two of the children on her knee at once; and was interested in Tom's pet blackbird; and expressed her admiration of Jack's string of blown eggs; and finally invited all the young ones to tea, in the housekeeper's room, that evening at six punctually. Another visitor was expected that evening. Much as Annie Brunel desired to play the part of a secret and invisible benefactor to all her friends, she found that this would cut off from her any chance of companionship; and so, before going down into Berks, she had told the story of her altered fortunes to Nelly Featherstone, and begged of that

young person to come down and stay with her for a time. Nelly burst into tears of joy; was profoundly conscious of the benefit of having so desirably rich a friend; was honestly delighted and prudently speculative at the same moment, and accepted the invitation.

Nelly was a girl of spirit. She knew she would be inspected by critical servants, and perhaps by visitors of exalted rank, and she resolved not to shame her old friend. She accurately sketched beforehand the character she would assume; fixed her demeanour; decided the tone she would adopt in speaking to Lady Annie Knottingley; and finally, bought the current number of *Punch*, and dressed her hair and herself in imitation of one of the ladies of that periodical.

The carriage was sent to meet her at Corchester in the evening. The calm dignity with which she treated the servants

was admirable. Nor was her dress less admirable, so far as a faithful copy of the *Punch* lady was concerned, except in point of colour. Unfortunately she had no guide to colour, except her own rather whimsical taste; and as several parts of her attire belonged to her dramatic wardrobe, she looked like a well-dressed lady seen through a prism.

When she entered the house, confronted the servants, was introduced to Mr. Cayley, and quietly went up to kiss Annie Brunel, her manner was excellent. A woman who makes a living by studying the ridiculous and imitating it, can lay it aside when she chooses. Nor was her assumption of womanly dignity and reserve less a matter of ease. Nelly Featherstone was clever enough to conceal herself from the eyes of a critical London audience; surely she was able to impose on a lot of country servants

and a lawyer inexperienced in theatrical affairs.

When she came into the drawing-room before dinner, her make-up was magnificent. She was a little too gorgeous, certainly; but in these days considerable latitude is allowed in colour and shape. Miss Brunel was alone.

"Why, Nelly," she said, "what was the use of your troubling to make yourself so fine? I must have put you to so much expense."

"Well, you have," said the other. "But it isn't every day I dine at a grand house."

"And you mustn't talk to me as if I were a duchess merely because Mr. Cayley is present. I have asked him to dine with us. You must speak to me as you are speaking now."

"Oh, no, my dear, it would never do,"

said the practical Nelly, with a wise shake of the head. "If you don't remember who you are, I must. You are a fine lady; I am an actress. If you ask me to visit you, it is because you wish me to amuse you. But when I'm not amusing you, I must be respectful. Mr. Cayley knows who I am; the servants don't. I can be grand to them; but with him——"

"My absurd girl, why wont you be yourself? You don't need to care for Mr. Cayley, or the servants, or any one else. Mr. Cayley knows I was an actress; if the servants don't, they will very soon. And you are here merely as my friend; and I am deeply indebted to you for coming; and if Mr. Melton will only refrain from changing the pieces for weeks to come, we shall have a pleasant romp together down here. By the way, did you hear some absurd noises a few minutes ago?"

"I did."

"That was my first token of popularity. I had the lodge-keeper's children up here to tea; and as they all got a lump of cake when they went away, they collected round the door outside and cheered. I think they call that intimidation and bribery—buying the popular vote, or something of the kind."

During dinner an obvious battle was being waged between Nelly and the butler. But the official and cumbrous dignity of the one was no match for the splendid and haughty languor of Nelly's eyes and the indolent indifference of her manner and tone. Somehow the notice of the servants was chiefly drawn to Miss Featherstone; but she decidedly managed to conquer them, and that in a style which puzzled and amused her friend at the head of the table. Nor would Nelly permit the least

familiarity of approach on the part of her hostess. And as it would have been preposterous to have chatted confidentially with a person who returned these advances with a marked deference and respect, "my lady" fell into her friend's whim, and the conversation at dinner was consequently somewhat peculiar.

When the two women were left alone, however, Annie Brunel strongly remonstrated. But Nellie was firm.

"If you don't know who you are, I do."

Drawing two low easy-chairs in towards the fire, they sat down and entered into mutual confidences. The one had much to tell—the other much to suggest; and never had two children more delight in planning what they would do if they were emperors than had these two girls in concocting plots for the benefit of all the persons they knew, and a great many more.

Miss Brunel took a note from her pocket and gave it to her companion to read.

"In strict confidence," she added.

These were the words Nelly saw—"*A friend who has urgent reasons for remaining unknown has placed to the credit of Mr. Hubert Anerley, at the London and Westminster Bank, the sum of* 30,000*l.* *Mr. Anerley is asked to accept this money as a free and frankly offered gift, to be used on behalf of himself and his family. A bank-note of* 100*l.* *is enclosed, to satisfy Mr. Anerley that this communication is made in good faith.*"

"Thirty thousand pounds!" said Nelly, in an awed whisper. "I have often thought of some one sending me a lot of money—thousands, millions of money—but I think if any one were actually to send me a hundred pounds I should die of surprise first and joy afterwards."

"The money has already been placed to

his account at the bank; and this note will be sent to him to-morrow when Mr. Cayley returns to town. How I should like to send old White the prompter a hundred pounds —the poor old man who has that dreadful wife."

"Don't do anything of the kind, my dear," said Nelly, sagely. "He would starve his wife worse than ever, because he wouldn't earn a penny until he had drunk every farthing of the money you sent him."

"Perhaps you will forbid my giving you anything?"

"Certainly not. I should be glad of a cup of tea or coffee."

"Which?"

"I like coffee best, but I prefer tea," said Nelly, with grave impartiality.

Tea and coffee having been procured, they continued their talk.

"You went to my lodgings?"

"Yes."

"And secured them for an indefinite time?"

"Yes."

"And all my clothes and things are as I left them?"

"Yes—that is, as far as I could look over them. Mr. Glyn was with me."

"Oh, he has forgiven you again!"

"Certainly not," said Nelly, with a touch of indignation. "*He* has not forgiven *me*, for I never provoked a quarrel with him in my life. He has come to his senses, that is all; and he is no sooner come to them than he is off again. But this is the final blow; he will never get over this."

"This what?"

"My disappearance from London without telling him. I go back. He comes to see

me; is surprised, offended; wants me to be penitent for having annoyed him by my silence. Of course I am not. Then he becomes angry, demands to know where I have been; I tell him that is my business, and he goes off in a fury. *That's* nothing new. But then he sends me a formal note, saying that unless I write to him and explain my absence from London he will never see me again."

"Which you will do."

"How could I without telling him about you."

"Say you went to visit a friend."

"Then he says, 'What friend?' with a face as black as thunder. I reply that I wont be subjected to his suspicions. He retorts that he is not suspicious; but that common sense, and what not, and what not. I tell him that he dare not talk to a lady of his own class in the way he talks to me;

and that it is because I am an actress that he is suspicious, taking up the vulgar prejudices against actresses. Now, all the time I have known him, I don't think we ever passed a day without having a quarrel about the profession."

"Your acquaintanceship must have been agreeable."

"It has. There is nothing both of us like so much as quarrelling and making up. For my part, I couldn't bear to have a sweetheart always pleasant, and reasonable, and sensible. I like one who is madly in love, who does extravagant things, who quarrels fearfully, and gets frantic with delight when you let him be friends again."

"But the very last time we spoke of Mr. Glyn you said he and you would never get on together because he wanted those very virtues of solidity, and common sense,

and manly forbearance. You said he was too like yourself."

"Did I say so? Well, I have a different explanation of it every day. I only know that we perpetually quarrel, and that the making up of quarrels is very nice."

"What would you do if I were to give you 500*l.* a year?"

"Go to Paris, and drive in the Bois de Boulogne with a pair of ponies," replied Nelly, with admirable precision.

"Wouldn't you marry Mr. Glyn, leave the stage, and be comfortable in some small house at Hampstead?"

"No," she said, frankly. "I haven't got the domestic faculty. I should worry his life out in a few months."

"What do you say, then, to going with me to America? I mean to leave England for a long time—for some years—and I shall spend most of the time in America,

visiting the places my mother and I used to know."

"You are going to leave England?" said Nelly, looking up with earnest, curious eyes.

"Yes."

"You will forgive my saying it—you have had some peculiar secret from me for a long time—not your coming here, but something quite different. I knew that when you suddenly left the stage, and wouldn't return, for no reason whatever. Why should *you* have left the stage, of all people?"

"I left it simply because I got to dislike it—to hate it."

Nelly Featherstone said nothing, but she was evidently not satisfied with the answer. She remained unusually thoughtful for some time.

"And now you are going to America,"

she said. "Is there no other reason besides your wish to visit those places you speak of?"

"There is; but it is of no consequence to any one."

CHAPTER XV.

'THE COULIN.'

THE snow that shone and gleamed in the sunlight along the Berkshire hills lay thick in the London squares, and was trampled brown and dry in the London streets; and yet even in the City it was white enough to throw a light upon the faces of the passers-by until commonplace countenances underwent a sort of transfiguration; and there was in the atmosphere a pearly radiance that brightened the fronts of the grey houses and glimmered into small and dingy rooms.

"Let all the light come in," said Dove,

lying in bed, with a strange transparent colour in her cheeks, and a wan lustre in her beautiful violet eyes; and when they let the strong light in, it fell on her face, and painted away the shadows under the eyebrows until the head that lay on the soft pillow acquired a strange, ethereal glory—a vision coloured with sunlight.

"You haven't played the 'Coulin' for me for a long time now, Dove," said Mr. Anerley.

"You used never to like my playing the 'Coulin;' why do you want me to play it now?"

"I wish you were well enough to play anything, my darling."

The girl stretched out her tiny, pale hand towards his.

"How you have petted me lately! If I were to get up just now and sing you the song I used to sing you, you wouldn't

laugh at my 'meghily' any more, would you?"

"*Meghily, meghily shall I sleep now*"—the words sounded in his ears as the refrain of some spirit-song, heard long ago, in happy times, down in the far-off legendary Kentish Eden, where they had once lived.

"A letter for you, papa," said Mrs. Anerley, entering the room.

"I don't want it," he said, petulantly and angrily turning away—quarrelling with the mist of bitter tears that rose around his eyes.

She glanced from him to Dove (her kindly eyes brightened as they met the quiet look of the girl), laid the letter down, and left the room again. Mechanically he took up the letter, opened it, and read it. Before he had finished, however, he seemed to recal himself; and then he read it again from the beginning, carefully, anxiously, with strange surprise on his face. He looked at the

envelope, again at the letter, and finally at the bank-note which he held in his hand.

"Dove, Dove!" he said, "look at this! Here is the money that is to take us all down to St. Mary-Kirby again—back to the old house, you know, and your own room upstairs, and in a little while the spring-time will be in, and you and I shall go down to the river for primroses as we used to do. Here it is, Dove—everything we want; and we can go whenever you brighten up and get strong enough to move."

"But where did you get the money, papa?"

"God must have looked at your face, my darling, and seen that you wanted to go to St. Mary-Kirby."

"And you have plenty of money, papa, to spend on anything?"

All his ordinary prudence forsook him.

Even without that guarantee of the bank-note, he would at once have believed in the genuineness of the letter, so eager was he to believe it for Dove's dear sake.

"Plenty of money, Dove? Yes. But not to spend on anything. Only to spend on you."

"There was Will's knock," she said; "he has just come in time to hear the news. But go and tell him in another room, papa, for I am tired."

So he left the room, and, as Will had come in, the two men had a long consultation over this strange letter.

"You need not remain long in suspense, sir," said Will; "write me out a cheque for fifty pounds and I will take it down to the bank."

"But I have none of the printed cheques of the bank."

"You don't need one. That is a vulgar

error. Any bit of paper, with a stamp on it, will do."

"But they must know that my signature is genuine."

"True. You must come down with me and see the manager. In any case, we can bear the disappointment, if the thing is a hoax. When you have ascertained that you are a rich man, father, I'll give you another piece of good news."

Mrs. Anerley was left with Dove, and the two men drove off to the bank. The manager had expected the visit. He warded off Will's bold inquiries with a grave silence; he had received certain instructions—it was not his business to say from whom.

"Before I can avail myself of this money," said Mr. Anerley, "you must at least answer me one question. Was it placed in your hands by Frederick Hubbard—by Count Schönstein?"

"No."

"Thank you."

So they went out into the free air, and lo! London was changed. It was no longer a cruel and bitter mother, starving her children, heedless of their cries and their sufferings, but a gracious empress, profuse of feasts, with stores of pleasures in her capacious lap. And this generous creature was to exercise all her power on behalf of Dove; and pure air, and the sweet sunlight, and the sharp hunger of health were once more to make the young girl's face less shadowy and unreal.

"Now for your news, Will," said the old man, cheerfully.

"Nothing much, sir," said he. "Only that I have gained the appointment, and the company guarantees me 1000*l.* a year for three years. It never rains but it pours, you see; and if Heaven would only send one more good——"

"My poor girl's health," said the old man; and he would have given up all his money, and been glad to suffer far greater privations than he had done for the rest of his life, only to secure that one supreme blessing.

When they returned to the house, Mrs. Anerley came to say that Dove wanted to see Will, alone. He went into the room, and stooped over her, and kissed her forehead, and took her hand. She looked very pleased and happy.

"Papa wont be vexed any more. He has got plenty of money, has he not?" she said.

"Yes; but that money is for them. *Our* money, Dove, must come from me; and I have got it—I have got the appointment—and so hurry, hurry fast and get well, and then hey! for a carriage, and cream-white horses, and jingling bells to take my Dove to church."

She pressed his hand slightly; and her eyes were wistful and absent. The beautiful land lay along the horizon, and she strained her vision to see it, and the sight of it, for it was so beautiful, made her sad.

"Come close down, Will, and let me whisper to you. I have taken a fancy into my head lately. I never spoke of it, for I knew neither you nor papa had money; but now it is different. You said we were to be married."

"Why talk of our 'maghiage' in that melancholy way, you provoking mouse!"

"Don't laugh at me, Will! What I have been thinking is this: that I should like to know that I could be married to you at any time without having to wait until I was better—which might be for such a long, long time; and I should like to know that at any moment I could say to you,

'Will, make me your wife *now*,' and you could come into the room, and all the people would know that I was your wife."

There are ghastly dreams in which the sleeper, gazing on a broad and sunny landscape, suddenly becomes conscious of a cold and terrible pressure, and lifting up his eyes sees a broad cloth, white and black like a funeral pall, descending slowly from the sky, and shutting out the glad sunlight, and gliding down upon the earth. All living things fly from it; if they remain they grow fixed and immovable, and their eyes become glazed as the eyes of death.

As terrible as such a dream was the vague, scarcely to be imagined suggestion which these patient, simple words of Dove bore with them; and Will, horror-stricken by the picture on which her absent eyes seemed now to be gazing (with its dreadful hint

about the people standing around), demanded why she should ask this thing, or why she troubled her mind with it.

"My dearest," she said, with a faint smile stealing across the childlike face, "it does not vex me. It pleases me. There is nothing dreadful about the idea to you, is there? I cannot go with you to church to be married. When you talk of a carriage, and white horses, and bells, it seems to me to be so far off—so very, very far away—that it is of no use, and it makes me miserable. But now, if we were married here, how I should like to hear you call me your wife, as you went about the room."

"And so you shall, my pet, whenever you please. But for you to turn such a dreadful heretic, Dove, and imagine that a marriage outside a church is a marriage at all! Why, even a dispensation from the Archbishop of Canterbury seems sacrilegious

where there are no bridecake, and old slippers, and a lot of carriages."

"Now you're becoming kind again, Will. And you'll do as I ask without bothering me about reasons? What I should like, you know, would be the *power* of getting married when I wanted—if I could have the dispensation, as you say, all ready, and just at any moment I might terrify you by crying out, 'Will, come and marry me!' I might be merciful, too, you know, Will; and perhaps let you off, if you were very good and attentive. I'd tell you some day to go to the drawer and take out the paper and burn it. It would be like giving a slave his freedom."

"You will be such a dreadful tyrant when you're married, Dove, that I shudder to think of what you'll do to me."

"I think I should have been very kind to you, Will," said the girl, suddenly bursting

into tears, and turning away her face from him.

Next morning Dove was a great deal better, everybody thought. Even the doctor spoke cheerfully, and the whole house was radiant. A thaw had set in; the air was foggy, and damp, and close; and the streets were in that condition which melted snow and drizzling rain generally produce in London; but inside the house there was sunlight enough for all concerned. And when, on the following morning, the weather cleared, and the sun painted bars of yellow on the curtains of the windows, it seemed as if the old, sad, anxious time were past, and the dawn of a new and happy life had broken over them.

Nevertheless, Dove did not give up her idea of the special licence and the private marriage. Rather she lay and brooded over it; and sometimes her face was moved

with a happy delight which those around her could not well understand. Indeed, her heart was so bent upon it, that they all agreed to acquiesce in her wishes, and the necessary steps were taken to secure the legalization of the ceremony. The covert opposition which the proposal had met was surely not due to any opposition to the marriage, on the part of any one concerned, but to another and vaguer feeling which no one of them dared to reveal to the other.

Said Dove to him suddenly this morning—

"Is Miss Brunel in town, Will?"

"I don't know, Dove."

"It is such a long time since she came to see me. I wonder if it was because you treated her so coldly the last time she was here."

"I?"

"You did not speak to her as you ought to have done. You kept near me, and kept

speaking to me, as if you imagined I was afraid she would take you away from me again. I know you did it to please me; but I could see something in her face, Will, that seemed to say that I needn't be afraid, and that she wouldn't come again. I should be sorry for that. Will you go and ask her to come again?"

"Certainly, if you wish it."

"And you will speak to her just as you speak to me. I can't be jealous, Will—of her; because she did not try to take you from me."

"I will go if you like, Dove," said Will, "but considering——"

"I have considered," with petulant haste. "I have nothing to do all day, but lie and consider—and how many things I have considered within this day or two! I have altered my mind completely about the marriage. I wont have you marry me, Will——"

"But all the forms have been gone through ——"

She lay silent and meditative for some time, and then she said—

"I am sorry to have given you so much trouble; but I should like to alter all my plans. You know the betrothals they have in French stories and in the operas—I should like to have a betrothal, Will, and all you will have to get for me is a big sheet of paper and a marriage ring."

How eagerly he accepted the offer! This pretty notion of hers, which was obviously only meant to please a passing whim, was so much more grateful to him than the marriage proposal, with its black background.

"We will have it at once, Dove; and I think you are so well that you might drink a little champagne with us to grace the ceremony. Then I shall be able to call you my wife all the same; and you shall wear the wedding-ring; and then, you know, we can

have the white horses and the carriages afterwards. But I am afraid the betrothal contract will be frightfully inaccurate; I don't know the terms——"

"Get a sheet of paper, Will, and I will tell you what to write down."

He got the paper, and, at her dictation, wrote down the following words—

"We two, loving each other very dearly, write our names underneath in token that we have become husband and wife, and as a pledge of our constant love."

She smiled faintly when he placed the writing before her, and then she leant back on the pillow, with a satisfied air. Mrs. Anerley now came into the room, and Will, obeying some further commands, went off to see whether Annie Brunel was yet in her old lodgings, and also to purchase a wedding-ring for the ceremony on which Dove had set her heart.

Miss Brunel's landlady told Will that her lady lodger would probably return the next day, with which piece of information he returned. He also showed Dove the wedding-ring; and she placed it on her finger and kept it there.

But that evening the insidious disease from which the girl was suffering, withdrew the treacherous semblance of health it had lent to her burning cheeks, and it was obvious that she had grown rapidly worse. They all saw it, and would not confess it to each other. They only noticed that Mrs. Anerley did not stir now from Dove's bedside.

Mr. Anerley spent nearly the whole of that night in walking up and down his own room; from time to time stealthily receiving messages, for they would not admit to Dove that they felt much anxiety about her.

The man seemed to have grown greyer; or perhaps it was the utter wretchedness of his face that made him look so old and care-worn. Will sate in an easy chair, gloomily staring into the fire. The appointment he had so eagerly sought and so joyfully gained, fancying it was to bring them all back again into pleasant circumstances, was only a bitter mockery now. He could not bear to think of it. He could bear to think of nothing when this terrible issue was at stake in the next room.

In the morning, when the first grey light was sufficiently clear to show Dove's face to the nurse and Mrs. Anerley, the latter looked at the girl for a long time.

"Why do you look at me so, mamma?" she asked.

She could not answer. She went into the next room, and, crying, "Oh, Hubert, Hubert, go and look at my Dove's face!" burst

into tears on her husband's bosom. And yet there was nothing remarkable about the girl's face—except, perhaps, to one who had watched it critically all the night through, and was alarmed by the transition from the ruddy lamplight to the grey and haggard tone of the morning.

The doctor came, and went away again, saying nothing.

Towards the forenoon, Dove said to Will—

"I want to hear the 'Coulin'——"

"Not the 'Coulin,' Dove," he implored.

"When Miss Brunel comes, perhaps she will play it. The music is simple. Put it on the piano—and—and send for her."

He himself went for her—out into the bright light of that fresh spring morning. Annie Brunel, when he found her, was in her poor lodgings, dressed in the simple black dress in which he had last seen her.

"I was going up to see Dove," she said, "when I heard she had sent for me. But —is there anything the matter?"

"Dove is ill," he said, abruptly. "I—I cannot tell you. But she wants you to come and—play a piece of music for her."

Neither of them spoke a word all the way to the house. When Annie Brunel, pale, and calm, and beautiful, went to the girl, and took up her white hand, and kissed her, there was a pleased smile on Dove's face.

"Why didn't they tell me you were ill?" she said. "I should have been here before."

"I know that," said Dove, in a whisper, "for—for you have always been kind to me. You have come in time—but I am too weak to tell you—ask Will—the betrothal——"

The brief explanation was speedily given; and then Dove said—

"I am very tired. Will you go into the

next room, and play me the 'Coulin;' and when you come back——"

She went to Dove's piano, and found there the air which she knew so well. And as she played it, so softly that it sounded like some bitter, sad leave-taking that the sea had heard and murmured over, Dove lay and listened with a strange look on her face. Will's hand was in hers, and she drew him down to her, and whispered—

"I could have been so happy with you, Will; so very happy, I think. But I had no right to be. Where is the—the paper I was to sign?"

He brought it and put it on the table beside her bedside; and Miss Brunel came into the room, and went over to Dove.

"That is the paper I must sign," said the girl. "But how can I? Will you—will you do it for me? But come closer to me and listen, for I have—a secret——"

When Annie Brunel bent down her head to listen, Dove drew the wedding-ring off her finger, kissed it tenderly, and put it on her companion's hand; and then she said, looking Annie in the face with a faint smile in the peaceful violet eyes—"It is your own name you must sign."

At the same moment she lay back exhausted, and to Mr. Anerley, who had hurriedly stepped forward to take her hand, she sighed wearily "I am so tired; I shall rest." And presently a beautiful, happy light stole over the girlish features; and he heard her murmur indistinctly—as if the words were addressed to him from the other world—the old familiar line, "*Meghily, meghily shall I sleep now.*"

They were the last words that Dove uttered; and the cause of the last smile that was on her sweet face.

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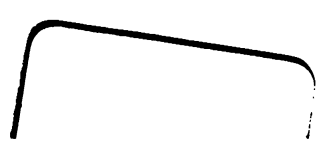
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